

THE SOUL WORK OF GRIEF

A THESIS-PROJECT

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To Mike,  
Beloved and Friend  
and  
To Gretchen,  
See you there

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

Do you believe this?”

—John 11:25-26

## CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	vi
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	vii
ABSTRACT.....	ix
Chapter	
1. THE SOUL WORK OF GRIEF .....	1
2. THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK .....	27
3. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	58
4. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN .....	82
5. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS.....	96
Appendix	
A. INVITATION LETTER .....	117
B. INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT.....	118
C. PRE-PROJECT SURVEY .....	121
D. POST-PROJECT SURVEY.....	126
E. THE SOUL WORK OF GRIEF FOCUS GROUP MATERIAL.....	130
F. THE EXPERIENCE OF GRIEF CHART .....	169
G. PARTICIPANTS AND RESPONSE SHEETS .....	170
H. SERMON SERIES.....	185
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	195
VITA .....	200

## FIGURES

A. Research Participants .....	89
B. The Experience of Grief.....	92

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This project is a small reflection of the hundreds of conversations that I have had with men and women who have experienced suffering and grief after the death of one they have loved. It has been a privilege to journey with many beyond those initial conversations. I have learned much from each of them that has guided me in my own experiences of grief.

I am grateful for the way that the life of Gretchen Hills intersected with mine for only a few short years. Her courage and tenacity in fighting her cancer while holding firmly to the hope of eternal life with the God she loved deeply is a model for every Christ-follower. The memories of certain conversations, important moments and joyful adventures shared with her until the day of her death will guide me the rest of my days on earth.

Stacey Laho has been and will continue to be a friend who shares with me the vision of guiding others to grieve fully so that they may know the reality of God's presence and care in their experience of grief. I am thankful to her for inviting me into her life after the death of her son, Kodey. I remain in awe of her willingness and courage to allow God to meet her in her deep sorrow. Being able to witness first hand the soul work of grief in her life has shaped my understanding of the real hope that God pours into us as we grieve.

I am humbled by the eagerness of the men and women from Stanwich Church who participated and shared their experiences of grief with one another during the focus group for this project. Each confirmed for me the importance and value of exploring and speaking about those things that many want to push through quickly with a loving and

caring community. The bond that is shared among those who grieve is one to be greatly cherished as it encourages each towards new life.

My husband, Mike, is God's gift to me in too many ways to express. Mike's patience, understanding and support as I pursued this course of study made the completion of this project possible. I know of no other individual who is able to quickly discern and step into what God is doing in the soul of another than Mike. I am grateful for the way he makes me attentive to God's work in my own soul.

*Soli Deo Gloria*



## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this thesis-project was to explore the ways the experience of grief shapes us to be spiritually formed as God uses grief to reveal who He is and to shape us in the image of His Son. I explored the biblical and theological foundation that allows us to declare that God is with us in our grief and guides us through our experience for our good and his glory. I observed contemporary grief theory in order to see how such research can affirm the biblical revelation and guide ministry leaders in providing effective pastoral care for the experience of grief. Material was developed for use in a focus group of ten men and women that served to educate about the experience of grief; to understand and experience the ways that God meets us in our journey of grief and to explore a variety of spiritual disciplines that can guide us in our grief. I conclude with recommendations for effective grief ministry through the local church.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE SOUL WORK OF GRIEF

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.  
—Matthew 5.4

The valley of suffering is the vale of soul-making.  
—Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*

The intensity of the season that was filled with multiple deaths and grief would only be understood in hindsight. The measurement of time from the first death until the fourth was twenty-seven months. But the grief preceding the anticipation of death, the experience of each death and the grief that followed could not be measured in a linear manner. The season was to be one of soul examining and faith affirming as the truth of God's promises and presence were questioned and challenged in ways that had never been previously experienced. Would God really be present in the darkness of death and grief? Would His promises of comfort hold fast and true? Is God really present in the midst of pain and suffering?

The email came from Gretchen three weeks before she and her family would return from Istanbul from their leave from the mission field. A lump had been found and the Turkish doctor had quickly affirmed that the treatment of the diagnosis exceeded his expertise. A 3 1/2 year journey through cancer wound its way to a final shared phone conversation that acknowledged her quickly approaching death and her declaration that "the peace finally came, it did, and it's awesome. You just wait." Less than twenty-four hours later Gretchen had died.

Four days earlier, Jeff and Stacy, the parents of Kodey, a healthy, vibrant, twelve-year-old-boy known from Ward Church (Evangelical Presbyterian Church) made

the horrific decision that no parent ever imagines having to face. A virus had attacked his heart and the machine that was to provide rest for his body as it awaited a transplant malfunctioned causing a catastrophic stroke. Kodey's brain ceased to function immediately. In spite of their numbness, they were able to clearly and consciously choose to remove the machines that kept only his heart beating. Three days later, a heart-broken church grieved openly as Kodey's devastated parents, young sister and large extended family followed his casket into the church. It was the same day Gretchen and I said to each other our final good-bye.

Two months following the two deaths, the call came that my father had a 'respiratory incident' and had been intubated at the nearby hospital. Three months of watching his body fail, yet his mind remaining alert and aware of what was happening to him meant that each day his wife and two daughters lived as though in a fog. Traveling a great distance to be by his bedside eleven times in three months was wearisome on the body and the soul. Being present as he chose to be relieved from intubation knowing his death would be imminent was nothing short of numbing. Staying bedside with him and anticipating his last breath was a privilege. Actually hearing his last breath was nothing short of awe-inspiring.

Almost two years to the day of my father's 'respiratory incident,' my exceedingly healthy mother was diagnosed with a cancer where no treatment would be required or even advised. Hospice was the recommendation and the referral was immediately provided. The familiar and frequent travel to participate in her dying brought the familiar experience of functioning in the fog. Her emotional pain matched her physical suffering and was just as hard to bear witness.

While the mind claimed what it knew to be true about God, the heart did not believe it. The only sense of God's hand and comfort came on Maundy Thursday when her death occurred almost three months after the diagnosis. The day and time important in that at that exact moment the service of communion that she had loved and had taught her daughter to love was beginning at the church she loved. What great comfort it was to imagine the possibility of her gathering at the moment of her death around the Passover table with Jesus and his disciples.

Experiencing the suffering, death and grief of four individuals of varying personal connection in a relatively brief period of time necessitated that a choice be made. Questions, observations and experiences could easily be placed on the margins of life and faith; or, they could be brought front and center and given time and attention to recognize the formational impact that such experiences have to direct, shape and give definition to life and faith. It has been the decision to embrace the second choice that has led to the study of theology, psychology and cultural implications of suffering, death and grief. Such study will never be completely finished. It is only the current reflection and integration of those things as they give shape to one's soul and life of faith that is explored here.

### An Ancient Problem

This you have seen, O Lord; Do not keep silent. O Lord, do not be far from me.  
—Psalm 35.22

When C. S. Lewis penned his grief following the death of his wife, his words echoed the experience of many who have experienced the death of a loved one. "No one

ever told me that grief felt so much like fear.”<sup>1</sup> “No one ever told me about the laziness of grief.”<sup>2</sup> No one would ever have told Lewis what he might expect for a simple reason: the topic is rarely talked about, not then and rarely even now. Even though a universal experience, pain, suffering, death and grief remain darkened topics that are rarely brought to light for discussion and understanding. Yet curiosity abounds as people of faith frequently rely on anecdotal reflection of the experience of others to create their paradigm to think about such topics. A lack of reflection on a biblical understanding of pain, suffering and grief result in not being able to anticipate or experience God's presence in the midst of personal darkness.

Our shared reality is that no one is immune from the terrible realities of the death of loved ones, debilitating and possibly fatal illnesses and other personal and communal tragedies that often leave many on the edge of life and faith. The question is not if such experiences will happen to us, but rather when they occur will we be prepared? Not engaging in the question beforehand makes it hard to ask the questions while in the midst of the crisis. Granted, such lessons are difficult to learn and master before the need arises. One wonders if it is a realistic possibility to have an adequate working knowledge or reference point to guide the way when it is most needed.<sup>3</sup>

This is in fact what makes the task of learning the experience and nuances of grief so important. The patterns of response that are developed early in relation to smaller griefs affect how we react when the trauma of death and grief come to us in a grander

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1961), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Keller, *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Dutton, 2013), 3.

way. It is difficult both to learn how to grieve and to grow in grief at the same time. Learning how one might experience such loss and grief in soul shaping ways is not something that should be put aside for what is hoped to be the distant future.<sup>4</sup>

Many will confirm that a vibrant life of faith is no guarantee that the crisis of loss will not undermine our faith, no matter how mature faith may appear to be. In grief, perspectives may easily be distorted and a sense of God's presence might come only from a place of memory. Many share the experience of a woman from Rwanda who after the genocide that took place in 1994 stated simply "the angels have left us."<sup>5</sup> When it comes to grief, a massacre of such magnitude does not have to occur for that sense to exist. The question is then raised as to how, who or what will guide grievers on their most personal journey?

Not solely a contemporary question or concern by any means, the reality of suffering is one of the most prominent themes of the Bible. The question that weighed heavy in the time of Abraham, Joseph, Job and David weighs just as heavily now. In *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering*, Keller argues that it is easy to determine that the Bible is about suffering as much as it is about anything. Old Testament wisdom literature addresses the problem while the book of Psalms provides prayers for possibly every life situation, particularly in the moments of grief (See Ps 42, 34:18, 119:28).<sup>6</sup> The psalmist becomes a model for verbalizing and reflecting on difficulties by crying out to God about what appears to be the randomness and the injustice of suffering.<sup>7</sup> A painful

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<sup>4</sup> John R. Claypool, *Tracks of A Fellow Struggler* (New Orleans, LA: Insight Press, 2004), 77.

<sup>5</sup> Donald J. Shelby, "A Soul-Sized Exploration," in *Reflections on Grief and Spiritual Growth* ed. Andrew J. Weaver and Howard W. Stone (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 132.

<sup>6</sup> All scripture references throughout are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*.

<sup>7</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 6.

read, the story of Job brings forward the great fear of what might happen to those we love and what we possess. Job's story also reveals the deep fear of wondering where God is in the midst of pain and suffering? Does He cause us to suffer? Is God present with us at our greatest points of need?

From Job to Ecclesiastes, Jeremiah to Habakkuk, Hebrew to 1 Peter, indeed throughout the revelation of his word, God is intent on personally interacting and guiding those who face relentless sorrows and difficulties. And through the same overarching biblical revelation, the central figure of the entirety of scripture is Jesus Christ, the man of sorrows who was well acquainted with grief.

When interviewed about the ways his understanding of grief and suffering have changed through observing tragic events around the world, Philip Yancey reflected that 'you have to be able to say that God feels your grief and that Jesus knows personally something of this grief you feel. The problem of pain is not one we can solve, what I try to answer is the question of where is God?'<sup>8</sup>

### Contemporary Experience of the Ancient Problem

Where is God? But go to Him when our need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face and a sound of bolting and doubly bolting on the inside. After that silence.

—C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

In 2012, I accepted a call to be an associate pastor at an independent church (Stanwich Church) in Greenwich, CT. The extended area of Fairfield County is known for several distinctions: its expensive cost of living zip codes, its diverse and

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Woodall, "Philip Yancey: The problem of pain is not one we can solve," *Christianity Today*, March 8, 2014, accessed November 17, 2014, <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/philip.yancey.the.problem.of.pain.is.not.one.we.can.solve/36114.htm>.

international population, and its location in the land of 9/11 as every person that has been asked has a story of who they knew that died or was dramatically affected that day. The annual remembrances and small park monuments stir memories and reminders that point individual griever and groups further back in time to that life-changing moment.

It is also an area that has experienced grief and loss in additional ways that are hard to imagine. Some of those moments have been ones that have affected areas well beyond Connecticut, but that does not invalidate the experiences of other cities experiencing their own sense of grief and loss from tragic situations. Three weeks after moving to the area in October 2012, Hurricane Sandy brought devastation to property and livelihood that is still being addressed and repaired and continues to haunt those primarily affected. Six weeks after the loss of property and possessions, the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School (40 miles from Greenwich) took place with twenty students and seven adults murdered bringing mind and heart numbing grief throughout Connecticut and across the nation. Four months later, in April, 2013, the bombings at the Boston Marathon were close enough in proximity to have Fairfield County newspapers filled with stories of local citizens who had been there or had been impacted. A sense of grief weariness and resignation became almost palpable. What has become evident in this particular geographical area is that there is no longer a question about whether something tragic will happen in the near future, but rather when?

The question arises as to how individuals and cultures navigate the dailyness of living while simultaneously bearing the weight of grief and the anticipation of the next tragedy? Where can a model or understanding for experiencing such moments and seasons be found?



One of the roles of culture is to guide individuals and communities into how to respond to the experience of grief, pain and loss. Sociologists and anthropologists who analyze and compare the various ways that cultures train and prepare its members for such challenges have noted that when this comparison is done, it is the contemporary secular Western culture that is one of the weakest and worst in history in providing a paradigm of understanding. Keller notes: "Every society must provide a discourse through which its people can make sense of suffering. That discourse includes some understanding of the causes of pain as well, and our proper responses to it. And with that discourse, a society equips its people for the battles of living in this world."<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Paul Brand, an internationally known leprosy doctor, affirms the sociological conclusion by recalling that "in the United States, I encountered a society that seeks to avoid pain at all costs. Western culture patients may live at a greater comfort level, but yet are far less equipped to handle suffering and are far more traumatized by it."<sup>10</sup> The more secularized contemporary Western culture becomes the less explanation is provided for suffering and little guidance as to how to deal with it. The inability to face and respond to such experiences in effective ways greatly impacts the cultural view of the physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual experience of grief and suffering. The result is that many-faceted perceptions about grief and unsatisfying answers to the questions about God and suffering are raised. When grief and suffering is avoided and marginalized, the ability for those experiences to shape well the life story of an individual and a culture becomes lost.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 16.

Christmas Day, 2012, came just eleven days after the events of Sandy Hook in Newton, Connecticut. On that day, the *New York Times* column by Maureen Dowd, “Why God?” addressed the intersection of the questions surrounding the darkness of horrific suffering and pain in the light of the celebration of the birth of the Christ Child. Dowd did what many do to seek answers to such difficult questions. She approached someone she trusted with the hope that he would be able to provide a response for the unspoken questions of the day. Family friend, Father Kevin O’Neil, verbalized the questions:

How does one celebrate Christmas with the fresh memory of twenty children and seven adults ruthlessly murdered in Newtown? How can we celebrate the love of a God become flesh when God doesn’t seem to do the loving thing? If we believe, as we do, that God is all-powerful and all-knowing why doesn’t He use this knowledge and power for good in the face of all the evils that touch our lives?<sup>12</sup>

Dowd reported that Father O’Neil suggested that implicit is the question as to how we look to God to act and to enter our lives:

We need one another to be God’s presence. A contemporary theologian has described mercy as ‘entering into the chaos of another.’ Christmas is really a celebration of the mercy of God who entered the chaos of our world in the person of Jesus, mercy incarnate. I have never found it easy to be with people who suffer, to enter into the chaos of others. What I do know is that an unconditionally loving presence soothes broken hearts, binds up wounds and renews us in life.<sup>13</sup>

The online response to the article was revealing. The overwhelming comments (currently standing at 703) gave evidence that our culture does not give people tools to deal with the tough questions. The online postings revealed that people were left to fend

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<sup>12</sup> Margaret Dowd, “Why God?,” *New York Times*, 25 December, 2012, accessed September 19, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/26/opinion/dowd-why-god.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Dowd, “Why God?”

for themselves as the perception was that not a singular individual or institution, be it secular or religious was capable of providing a satisfying response. The conclusion being that “today we are more shocked and undone by suffering than our ancestors.”<sup>14</sup>

Writing for *The Atlantic Online Journal*, Eleanor Barkhorn recounted what she saw on Twitter and Facebook in the hours after the Boston Marathon bombings that killed three injured 264 and the Texas fertilizer explosion in West, Texas that occurred two days later killing 35 individuals. Faithful people were reminding other faithful people to drop everything and pray. But it was clear that non-religious people were invoking prayer in ways that they would not have under normal circumstances. It was noted that #PrayforBoston rose and fell quickly because the prayers were not really about faith and trusting in God to begin with. Rather, the words were actually mere reflections of anxiety and sadness and not knowing where to turn or how to think about what was taking place. To whom or what were the #PrayforBoston prayers being addressed? As America continues to become increasingly secularized with mass tragedies happening with a seeming frequent consistency, the call for prayer in times of such horrors seems to mark a kind of existential angst, sorrow or confusion for which other words or gestures seem inadequate.<sup>15</sup>

On rare occasions, voices in the public forum address the possibilities that grief does not have to leave us bewildered with a sense of loss and lack of direction, but rather can be transforming. David Brooks, op-ed columnist for the *New York Times* has been a keen observer of grief and suffering and its impact on individuals and cultures. In his

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<sup>14</sup> Dowd, “Why God?”

<sup>15</sup> Eleanor Barkhorn, “Why People Prayed for Boston on Twitter and Facebook and Then Stopped,” *The Atlantic*, April 20, 2013, accessed November 4, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/04/why-people-prayed-for-boston-on-twitter-and-facebook-and-then-stopped/275137/>.

piece, “What Suffering Does” *New York Times*, April 8, 2014, Brooks affirms that the unspoken assumption for contemporary American culture is that the main goal of life is to maximize happiness. When plans are being made for the future, individuals talk about the good times and experiences that they hope for and anticipate. But when they reflect on the past, they do not solely recall times of happiness. It is actually the experience of loss and suffering that seem the most significant:

People shoot for happiness but feel formed through suffering. Suffering is sometimes just destructive, to be exited as quickly as possible, but some people are ennobled by it. But the big thing that suffering does is that it takes you outside of precisely that logic that the happiness mentality encourages. Happiness warns you to think about maximizing your benefits. Difficulty and suffering send you on a different course.<sup>16</sup>

Brooks further explains that suffering may in fact drag you deeper into yourself which makes the suggestion that this type of self-absorption can at times be beneficial. Such suffering gives people a more accurate sense of their own limitations, what they can control and cannot control. Try as they might and as others might encourage them to move on, they just can’t tell themselves to stop feeling pain and sadness or to stop missing the one who has died or gone.<sup>17</sup>

For some, addressing the questions and the experiences of grief and suffering begins to feel like a call:

They are not masters of the situation, but neither are they helpless. They can’t determine the course of their pain, but they can participate in responding to it. The right response to this sort of pain is not pleasure. It’s holiness. It means seeing life as a moral drama, placing the hard experiences in moral context and trying to redeem something bad by turning it into something sacred.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> David Brooks, “What Suffering Does,” *New York Times*, April 8, 2014, accessed October 12, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/08/opinion/brooks-what-suffering-does.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Brooks, “What Suffering Does.”

<sup>18</sup> Brooks, “What Suffering Does.”

Brooks instructs that grief recovery is not like recovering from a disease. Many people don't come out healed; but they come out different. The question becomes different in what way? Those who have been guided or who know how to navigate their grief reveal that surprisingly they can actually be drawn deeper into loving commitments rather than push away from people and situations where the possibility for suffering exists. Brooks expresses what can be possible from grief when he writes "that even while experiencing the worst and most lacerating consequences, some people double down on vulnerability. They hurl themselves deeper and gratefully into their art, their loved ones and their commitments."<sup>19</sup>

#### The Ancient Solutions

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

—Revelation 21:4

The opportunity that is presented to churches and ministry leaders in moments of grief and suffering is one that can impact the secular culture in significant ways. The challenge is found in being able to offer the ancient solution to pain and suffering in ways that do not sound lofty or patronizing. The ancient solution is one that always directs the griever to what is true about God at every moment and not what may be felt about God at any given moment.

Simone Weil, French philosopher and Christian mystic, writes in the early part of the last century that suffering makes God appear to be absent.<sup>20</sup> But appearances may be

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<sup>19</sup> Brooks, "What Suffering Does."

<sup>20</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 6.

deceiving. In Psalm 34, David would counter that though God may feel absent, it does not mean he actually is. Remembering a time when his life had been in grave danger and all seemed lost, David concludes, “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Ps 34:18). The truth of God’s presence in the midst of suffering provides the comfort and peace that surpasses all understanding but it also opens the door even slightly for an entry into understanding the love and compassion of God by those who have never engaged in that possibility.

As previously suggested, the great theme of God’s revelation is the way he brings fullness of joy not just despite but through suffering just as Jesus saved us not in spite of but because of what he endured on the cross. And so there is now the ability to experience and share together in peculiar, rich and poignant joy that seems to come to us through and in suffering.<sup>21</sup>

Moving beyond what can often sound overly simplistic, those who are grieving need to know how to actually walk with God in such times. Is it in fact possible, as Brooks suggests, for us to orient ourselves towards something beyond us so that suffering changes us for the better rather than for the worse?<sup>22</sup>

When an individual experiences a time of suffering and grief, a sense of darkness may rule the day. Those things that are not known and cannot be controlled can lead to great fear. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests in *Learning To Walk In The Dark* that is only the beginner’s definition of darkness. If one is a believer in God, then darkness is also

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<sup>21</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 9.

where God dwells. He may be difficult to see and it may be difficult to experience his presence, but it can be trusted that he is there.<sup>23</sup>

Taylor suggests that the biblical revelation indicates that there are other things to be known about darkness. When Abraham doubted God's promise of children, God led him outside into the darkness where He could see the stars more clearly. Abraham's doubt was met by experiencing a light, even a distant one, in the darkness.<sup>24</sup> At life-turning moments the bible shows that God routinely does important things with His people in the night. Jacob wrestles an angel by a river all night long, surviving the match with a lifelong limp, but also with a blessing and a new name. Joseph has a dream that catches the pharaoh's attention leading him to an important position for His purposes. The children of Israel leave from Egypt under the cover of darkness. God parts the Red Sea at night. The people are fed with manna falling from the sky in the wilderness at night. The story of Moses and his encounters with God brings to light another understanding of darkness. In the darkness, God is experienced as both dangerous and divine. God does some of His best work when His people are experiencing darkness.<sup>25</sup>

Offering additional words of hope in the midst of darkness, John Claypool boldly claims in *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler* that despair in the face of grief and suffering is always presumptuous. How do we know what lies in the 'Great Not Yet' or is some present evil working itself out as a blessing in disguise?<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning To Walk In The Dark* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), 44.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 44.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 45.

<sup>26</sup> Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, 15.

For Claypool, the answer to those questions is found in the book of Job, where the suffering and grief that feels covered in darkness are most painfully addressed. The story of Job validates the deepest sense of grief possible, but reveals the hope that exists in the midst of the grieving. Job's story is a familiar one: there was no one else like on the earth, blameless and upright, who feared God and turned away from evil (Job 1:8). But when his seven sons and three daughters were killed, his livestock and livelihood were plundered, his home destroyed, and his health removed Job set out on an unfamiliar journey of grief, suffering and bewilderment as he questioned who he was, and more importantly, who God is. Job models for us what transformative grief can look like.<sup>27</sup>

When Job realizes the magnitude of his loss and suffering he curses the day he was born and the night he was conceived and makes clear that if he could die immediately he would welcome it as relief. All meaning and purpose have totally collapsed for him. As he becomes aware of the full extent of what he has lost, Job sees no future left for himself.

Job is engulfed by despair and the impulse to regard the whole experience as a total curse with giving up appearing to be the most appropriate response (Job 2:9). As he comes to terms with reality, Job quite predictably turns to the most appealing aspects of it: his memories of his past which were the good days. But now those days are gone. Job is to discover that the experience of loss makes one realize in new ways the value of what used to be and it pushes one back into the past with great emotions. But Job's sentimental journey into the past does not end in his staying there.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, 79.

<sup>28</sup> Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, 81.



Throughout the story of Job, the foundational issue in grief is never about finding a rational explanation for what has occurred. What is really being questioned is the nature of life itself and the One who gives it. Only when Job moved to the level of having it out with God in ways that few would imagine possible did his healing in grief begin. The climatic point comes when Job, the one who was made, stands face to face with the One who did the making. In his encounter with God, Job moves in two directions: a new understanding of the past and a fresh vision of the future.<sup>29</sup>

In spite of the overwhelming loss, Job realized that he had still had a future in God, for God had a future in Job. It is at this moment that Job is able to move from all-consuming grief towards hope. No one ever moves out of the shadows of grief apart from the real possibility of hope. What Job discovered in his encounter with God was that goodness and mercy can be counted on to follow him “all the days of his life,” just as the Psalmist said (Ps 23:6). He who has given good gifts of the past could be depended on to continue to give meaning to Job’s life.<sup>30</sup>

So what changed for Job? When Job got all the way down to God, he came face to face with the one with whom he ultimately had to encounter with his questions and his heartache. What were the values he had loved and lost? Gifts he had never deserved in the first place. The One from whom had come ‘the good old days’ could be trusted to provide ‘good new days.’ If yesterday was rich and full of meaning, why couldn’t tomorrow be the same? Knowing that all his days came from the same source, Job was

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<sup>29</sup> Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, 83.

<sup>30</sup> Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, 86.

able to emerge much more the person he was created to be, intimately knowing and understanding His relationship with God.<sup>31</sup>

The ancient solution for those who suffer in grief is one that not only validates suffering but leads to a different conclusion: a hopeful one. The Christian faith responds to suffering by saying, yes, it is overwhelming. Indeed, suffering is real; suffering is often unfair; but suffering also has meaning. There is a redemptive purpose to suffering where it can draw one more deeply into the love of God than can be imagined.<sup>32</sup> If the biblical theology of suffering is known and if hearts and minds are allowed to be engaged by it, then when grief, pain, and loss come, one will not be surprised but rather can trust and respond in the variety of ways presented in scripture.<sup>33</sup> That is the hope and the possibility that the ancient solution provides.

#### The Soul Work of Grief

One learns of the pain of others by suffering one's own pain, my father would say, by turning inside oneself, by finding one's own soul. And it is important to know of pain, he said.

—Chaim Potok, *The Chosen*

In his intensely personal memoir of grief, Gerald Sittser explains further the middle place of grief that Job had encountered. That is, the ways in which those who suffer loss live suspended between a past for which they long and a future for which they can only hope. Sittser suggests that it is in that suspension between experiences that the soul work of grief is done.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, 89.

<sup>32</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 30.

<sup>33</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 320.

<sup>34</sup> Gerald Sittser, *A Grace Disguised* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 66.

Whatever that future may be, it will and must include the pain of the past with it. Sorrow never entirely leaves the soul of those who have suffered a severe loss. If anything, it may cut in more deeply. But this depth of grief is the sign of a healthy soul, not a sick soul. It is not something to escape but something to embrace. From God's redemptive perspective grief can be noble and it can be gracious. Grief enlarges the soul so that the soul is capable of mourning and rejoicing simultaneously, of feeling the world's pain along with one's own and hoping for the world's healing at the same time. However painful it may be, sorrow is good for the soul.<sup>35</sup> Along with the suggestion of Brooks' transformative purpose of grief, Sittser believes that:

deep sorrow often has the effect of stripping life of pretense, vanity and waste. It forces us to ask basic questions about what is most important in life. Suffering can lead to a simpler life, less cluttered with nonessentials. It is wonderfully clarifying. That is why many people who suffer sudden and severe loss often become different people.<sup>36</sup>

But deep sorrow is good for the soul for another reason as well. Such sorrow can make us more alive to the present moment. Christian mystics have described this possibility of a new way of experiencing the present. Jean-Pierre De Caussade called it the sacrament of the present moment.<sup>37</sup> This present moment, this eternal now, is sacred because, however painful, it is the only time we have to be alive and to know God. The past is gone, the future not yet here, but the present is alive to us.

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<sup>35</sup> Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 73.

<sup>36</sup> Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 76.

<sup>37</sup> Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, 76.

## Scope of Project

The thesis of this project is that God uses the experience of grief to reveal who He is and shapes us into the image of His Son. Even those living by faith in Jesus Christ frequently find it difficult to understand the ways that the experience of grief shapes who they are. Too frequently, Christians believe that because of their faith, the time, energy and focus they give to grief in their lives should be short in duration. If it is believed that God is the Loving Lord who works all things together for good, then surely it can be said that he can be trusted to bring good into our lives in the midst of our pain. And yet, God's redeeming purposes and intentions in the experience of grief are most often ignored or misunderstood. Denying the impact of the experience of grief means that the opportunity that exists for spiritual formation and a deepening experience of God's presence are dismissed.

## Guiding Theological and Biblical Principles

In the preparation of material to be used with a focus group designed to provide grief care for those who have experienced the death of a loved one, two foundational areas will be researched and applied. Chapter Two will observe the biblical and theological framework that provides the foundation for understanding the soul work of grief. The theological and biblical principle for any grief care is found in the words of Paul: "We do not grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thess 4:13). With those words, Christians are given permission to grieve. In Christ we have a hope, but that hope does not dismiss or negate the grief. Rather, the hope that we have in Christ is what aides us in putting grief in its place. When Paul writes, "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" (1 Cor 15:55), he is acknowledging that death must be felt

and acknowledged or the grief will remain. Because of the cross and resurrection, death has no victory. The theological challenge is always to keep both the cross, with all its suffering and pain, held in light of the resurrection and the hope that it objectively and experientially provides.

### Literature and Grief Theory Review

An important element in offering effective grief care is to understand contemporary grief theories that intersect with biblical and theological truth. In Chapter Three, the reader will first be served by exploring the ineffectiveness of the traditional stages theory of grief that is most commonly understood in our culture. Exploring the relevance and application of recent studies and research in the areas of resilience and attachment theory will provide a foundation for providing effective care that leads to an opportunity and experience for spiritual growth.

### Background Narrative

As the researcher, I approach the topic of the soul work of grief with extensive personal and professional experience. While a student in the graduate program in Hospice Education at Madonna University in Livonia, Michigan, I served as a hospice chaplain for Arbor Hospice based in Ann Arbor, Michigan that served the Down River communities of Detroit, Michigan. After two years of providing spiritual care and support to terminally ill individuals and their families, I became the Director of Grief Support Services for Arbor Hospice. I served in these roles at Arbor Hospice from 1998 to 2005. In my role as Director, I led a staff of ten social workers, counselors and art

therapists who provided grief support to children, adolescents and adults who had experienced the death of a close family member or friend.

During that time, I completed graduate studies in Hospice Education with an emphasis on bereavement. Through my work at Arbor Hospice, I developed workshops for pastors and ministry leaders to equip them in end of life care. I also created material to be used in support groups for those who have experienced the adult loss of a parent and for parents who have experienced the death of a young child. With the support and guidance of the CEO of Arbor Hospice, I developed a grief camp (Camp BraveHeart) designed specifically for families. As an outreach into the community, I developed and implemented a workshop for women who had experienced the death of their mothers, “The Memory in the Mirror.” Much was learned as women eagerly came to learn about their grief and to share their experience with other women who had known first hand the same type of loss. That workshop has now been presented to more than 2000 women in three different states.

The personal experience of grief came within a twenty-seven month period (October, 2002 - March, 2005) when I experienced the death of my closest friend as well as both parents. It was a challenge to continue in my role as Director of Grief Support Services at Arbor Hospice when I needed to address my own experiences of grief.

During the season of personal grief, it became clear that the limitations of working within a secular agency had impacted my understanding of the experience of grief. While I had believed that God would somehow be present with someone as they experienced grief, I did not understand what that might look like or how it was even

possible. Words of real hope were not able to be freely expressed within the structure of a secular agency.

In my current role as an associate pastor at Stanwich Church, I have been able to freely explore and engage in the questions regarding God's presence with us in our grief. Stanwich Church is typical in the care that is provided those in grief: responding at the time of the death with phone calls and pastoral visits, possible attendance or officiating at funerals, follow up phone calls, pastoral counseling sessions or visits after the death. Beyond that amount of attention, grief has not previously been viewed as an opportunity for spiritual formation.

However, it has been repeatedly observed that attendees of Stanwich Church as well as the Greenwich community are responsive when given the opportunity to explore their grief. In May, 2013 and 2016, "The Memory In the Mirror" workshop was offered and was well attended by women who were members of Stanwich Church with the majority of participants being from the surrounding community. The need to provide an opportunity to explore grief in more depth and with guiding tools was confirmed by the significant response to the event.

### Sharing In Grief

When Brooks speaks about what is possible in grief combined with what the story of Job reveals, the possibility surfaces that God steps into the most horrific, mind-numbing moments and transforms the core of who we are in relation to Him, our soul. But this important "soul work" rarely can be done on its own. It is done best in connection and community with those who have their own experience of grief who are

able to validate the suffering and grief of another. The apostle Paul knew that one of the important elements of being connected in the body of Christ is the comfort that can be offered to one another. Comfort and understanding for any circumstance is best given and received by those who have in fact experienced the comfort that God provides (2 Cor 1.3-4).

While significant grief takes place individually, it is the care and support that comes from the company of others who are also grieving that is enormously comforting. Grieving individuals need opportunities to tell their stories of grief again and again. They need to feel safe to explore the details of their grief experience in order to make sense of it. Such a group provides individuals with the understanding and support they need. They are able to ask questions of one another, and empathize in ways that only another grieving individual can. While each individuals' context of grief is uniquely their own, there are many features of grief that are universally experienced. The opportunity to be with and share with others the many-faceted aspects of grief can be reassuring and comforting to the individual as they realize that they are not alone.

It is a rare occurrence for an individual to take the time that they need to fully embrace and understand their experience of grief. Being with others who share the experience of grief that may be offered through a especially designed support group is often the only time many find they are able to allow themselves to process all that they are experiencing. When a group is composed of individuals with varying lengths of time that have passed since their loss, group members are able to see others who may be farther along in their grief experience. Such an experience allows for a sense of hope that someone in incredible pain from grief can in fact, survive. There is an incredible



benefit for grieving individuals that comes when they realize that they are able to care for others while they are experiencing their own grief.<sup>38</sup>

### Setting and Methodology of Focus Group

Guiding others through the experience of grief towards one of hope was the purpose of the focus group developed for this project, 'The Soul Work of Grief.' The group consisted of ten (men and women) who are current members of Stanwich Church, Greenwich, CT. The overarching question that directed the development of materials to be used in the group was whether or not God shapes our souls in our grief? If He does, how do we participate in such intimate soul work?

There was no limit for participants regarding the length of time since the death of the family member or other loved one recognizing that the soul work of grief is not time-bound. Each person's experience of grief was recognized as his or her own, even when the experiences appeared to be similar. Who the grieving person was before the loss, what had been felt and experienced in the loss, and how one responded to the loss made each person's experience different from the others. While each experience of grief and loss was a personal one, each found others with whom they could share and express their loss.

The group met for five two hour sessions over the course of five weeks. An additional gathering was held that served to recognize and celebrate what had taken place individually and as a group during the previous five weeks. Each session provided

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<sup>38</sup> Through leading a wide variety of grief support groups while on staff at Arbor Hospice, Ann Arbor, MI (1999 - 2005) and various ministry settings, the researcher affirms that sharing one's experience of grief within a grief support group provides participants a unique way of understanding their unique grief experience as well as offering hope to others.

education regarding a particular aspect of grief and suffering with allocated time for group reflection, introduction to specific scriptures, spiritual readings and disciplines that were intended to aid the soul work of grief. Spiritual disciplines used to connect with the experience of grief included lectio divina, prayer of examen, practicing the Presence, self-care and sabbath. The setting for this thesis project also took into account that the prevailing culture does not promote or help facilitate the silence, space and solitude that would be helpful for engaging in transformative grief work.

Since the focus group was faith-based, the questions that were addressed and woven into the teaching and use of spiritual disciplines explored these faith challenges of grief:

- Does belief in God provide us with immunity from dangers, disease, suffering and calamity?
- Does belief in God mean we will never have to raise the questions, “Why us, me, him or her? Why now?”
- Does faith in God and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ provide the spiritual understanding and power that will prevent or alleviate the pain of grief and any experience of despair, emptiness and doubt?
- In responding to our prayers, can we expect God to send us a cure and postpone death for us and our loved ones?
- Does faith in Jesus’ resurrection mean our grief will be short and that we will cope easily with our losses?
- For a person of faith, is death an intrusion into life or an integral and accepted part of God’s plan for life?
- Does everyone have to walk shadowed valleys alone?
- In such valleys are we really alone, or does God in Christ walk with us?
- Does faith in God translate into a rational understanding of why things happen to us in life?

- Or is faith instead accepting the reality that there is much that we do not understand about the little that we do know?<sup>39</sup>

### Looking In Reverse to Live Forward

When Philip Yancey was asked to reflect on his experience when he visited Newtown, Connecticut within days of the Sandy Hook tragedy, he reflected on a statement he had written about previously: faith means believing in advance what only makes sense in reverse.<sup>40</sup> Something as horrific as 9/11, Sandy Hook, the death of a spouse, child, parent or much loved friend will bring us to places that most are hesitant to go: questioning and wondering about the complicated relationship of the omnipotent, sovereign, loving God and the suffering found in the lives of individuals. It is the experience of grief that necessitates that exploration be done of looking in reverse in order to live forward.

Through faith, something as painful as grief may be seen as an invitation by God to live life more deeply and experiencing the love of God more intensely. Guiding those who grieve to place in the hands of God something that is so fearful and painful as loss and death, can be a source of spiritual formation which will always draws us closer to His heart.

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<sup>39</sup> Shelby, "A Soul Sized Exploration," 134.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Woodall, "Philip Yancey: The problem of pain is not one we can solve," *Christianity Today*, March 8, 2014 accessed November 17, 2014. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/article/philip.yancey.the.problem.of.pain.is.not.one.we.can.solve/36114.htm>.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and that he will stand upon the earth at last. And after my body has decayed, yet in my body I will see God! I will see him for myself. Yes, I will see him with my own eyes. I am overwhelmed at the thought!

—Job 19. 25-27

### Introduction

To understand how God uses the experience of grief to reveal who He is and to shape us into the image of His Son we must begin with a biblical and theological understanding of the way God engages with His people in all the circumstances of their lives. I will describe God's intentions to invite us into the life of the Trinity to spiritually form and shape our souls followed by the ways the incarnation of the Son expresses in specific and tangible ways how God engages in our experience of grief. The soul work of grief will be further explored through viewing the biblical and theological meaning of suffering, the Christian view of death and the hope that is within us that will reveal in full what we now know in part (1 Cor 13:12).

The underlying question is whether God engages with every aspect of our life or does He remain observing us from a distance? Frequently, even long-time faithful people find that their soul needs to become aware or attentive in fresh ways to God's presence in their lives. Chris Webb in *The Fire of The Word* says it well: "the realization burst in that when God looks at me, what he sees is shaped by his intense and passionate, love,

not by anything I may or may not have done. In my ignorance I had thought that God first and foremost wanted to deal with my sin. In reality, before all else, he wanted me.”<sup>1</sup>

If God does indeed want us, then surely He does so for a reason. Not to possess us; not to control us; not to manipulate us but rather He joins us in a lifelong, faith filled process of His Holy Spirit transforming the whole person into the likeness of Christ to the glory of the Father as informed by the word of God.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, if God wants to transform the whole person, then it can be understood that God intends to use the entirety of experiences, the delightful to the horrific, the joyful to the grief-filled to shape us to be image bearers of His Son, Jesus Christ at the core of our being. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6).

### Spiritual Theology

It is through the knowledge of spiritual theology that we come to see how God shapes the souls of His people and discover what is possible when our lives become engaged with God’s transformative work in our lives. Not to be understood as yet another theological framework to master cognitively, spiritual theology brings to light and life what may be expressed in other frameworks of biblical, historical and systematic theology. The focus of spiritual theology is to show how a relationship with God is manifested in all of our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Webb, *The Fire of the Word: Meeting God on Holy Ground* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 43.

<sup>2</sup> David Currie, Lecture in opening cohort for “Spiritual Formation for Ministry Leaders” track, Doctor of Ministry, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, St. Edmund’s Retreat Center, May 17, 2012.

How is spiritual theology more clearly defined? Eugene Peterson suggests that it is simply giving attention to living what is known and believing about God in every circumstance of our lives and to do so in ways that reflect who He is as God.<sup>3</sup> If only it were that simple! Alistair McGrath expands the understanding by saying, “such spirituality arises from a creative and dynamic synthesis of faith and life that comes together in the desire to live out the Christian faith authentically, responsibly, effectively and fully.”<sup>4</sup> Both expressions of spiritual theology speak to the longing for meaning and purpose in expressing our faith in ways that truly connect with the reality of our lives. Living in that reality will surely reflect heartache and pain as well as joy and delight. But for many, finding a faith that is lived in such a transformative and authentic way proves to be elusive.

Others expand the discussion of spiritual theology to frame it as seeking whole-life discipleship to Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Dallas Willard suggests that the heartbeat of a disciple is one that beats with the heartbeat of Jesus, pure and simple. Jesus made it clear that for him, it is the heart that matters the most for out of it flows a continuous revolution of the human heart and spirit.<sup>6</sup>

### Invited To the Life of the Trinity

How do we know what authentic faith expression through whole-hearted discipleship look like? Is God inviting us to something that has not been full entertained before? What does it look like? The importance, validity and significance of any

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Alister McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1999), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Foster, *Life with God* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 24.

invitation is always determined by who is extending it. The hope and promise of authentic faith and transformation is only as good and firm as the One who can bring the invitation to reality. As seen in the opening chapters of God's revelation, it is clear what God's intention is: "let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen 1:26). Such a dynamic, personal and grand invitation to be shaped as God's image bearers will always be a reflection of who God is in the life of the Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Any capacity we have for drawing near to God and experiencing God in our lives comes from the One who wants us to draw near to us with an invitation and promise of companionship and friendship like no other.<sup>7</sup>

Those who join with the life of the Trinity discover that it is the entirety of their lives that they become a part of the relational life that takes place among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In his dialogue with the philosophers in Athens, the apostle Paul says about the Trinity, "He is not far from us; for in him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:27-28). Writing in *Experiencing the Trinity*, Darrell Johnson offers that the Trinity draws close to us to draw us close to the Trinity, to draw us within the circle of the Trinity's life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

Johnson goes further to explain that since the ruin of creation by sin, there is sorrow within the circle. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit deeply grieve the ruin of the world where death, sorrow and grief have entered.<sup>9</sup> Still, underneath that sorrow is the joy the Trinity has in being our Savior. The joy of coming to rescue, heal and re-make

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<sup>7</sup> Webb, *The Fire of the Word*, 48.

<sup>8</sup> Darrell W. Johnson, *Experiencing the Trinity* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2002), 75.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson, *Experiencing the Trinity*, 79.

us. There are no experiences that take place outside that relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The experiences of grief and sorrow are just as much of being a part of the life of the Trinity as are times of great joy.<sup>10</sup>

### Purposeful and Mutual Indwelling

The mystery of the relationships within the Trinity is often described as being one of perichoresis: a term from the ancient fathers finding contemporary use that expresses the intimate union and mutual indwelling, the three members share with each other. The best image of the relationship is one of a dance where each participant not only knows the steps, but experiences it joyfully.<sup>11</sup> That image alone makes being invited into the life of the Trinity irresistible. Who would not want to be swept up in such great joy and purpose? The Trinity brings together the richness of the complexity of One God in Three Persons by providing an expansive vision of God for which the only appropriate response is one of worship, deep devotion and trust.

There is more to solely an image of joining in a joyful dance when we accept the invitation. Together, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit desire to enter into the daily, deep and personal aspect of every aspect of our lives. It is the personal God that is experienced as Father, Son and Holy Spirit that addresses us in every circumstance with no restrictions. From start to completion, the invitation to be shaped to be like Jesus is an intensely personal one because God is intensely personal. Peterson explains it this way:

God is emphatically personal; God is only and exclusively God in relationship. Trinity is not an attempt to explain or define God by means of abstractions, but a

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<sup>10</sup> Johnson, *Experiencing the Trinity*, 79.

<sup>11</sup> McGrath, *Christian Spirituality*, 51.



witness that God reveals himself as personal and in personal relations. Under the image of the Trinity we discover that we do not know God by defining him but by being loved by him and loving in return.<sup>12</sup>

Since relationships are at the core of the Trinity, relationships will be the primary way that He engages us: creating, pursuing, repairing, restoring and redeeming relationships in and through us. The challenge for us is that too frequently our lives are lived with a knowledge expressed solely in a doctrine of who God is and do not reflect the dynamism of the life of the Trinity. Image bearers reflect more than God's mind. Being an image bearer embraces all of our body, our heart and our experiences. One becomes changed, or shaped, to be like Jesus when those things are put aside that keep God from touching a heart and shaping a life.<sup>13</sup> Just like every other aspect of the Christian faith, the same intentional journey of formation to feed the soul, to activate the conscience to be formed, conformed and transformed begins with God alone.<sup>14</sup>

A party invitation with only one in attendance is not a party. If only one being is moving in the life of the Trinity then not only will it be found to be boring and flat, but certainly, sad and joyless. We do not participate on our own in the life of the Trinity just as it is impossible to engage in soul transformation alone. Not only is the work required to be shaped like the heart of Christ himself initiated by Him and Spirit driven, but such heart-shaped living is found in a dynamic relationship with the people of God that further reveals His grand design.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Ligouri, MO: Ligouri/Triumph, 1996), 62.

<sup>14</sup> Foster, *Life with God*, 106.

<sup>15</sup> Foster, *Life with God*, 101.

## Disciplines for Formation

The most important place where we will come to understand and experience the transformational work of the Trinity will be through the disciplines made available to us in the reading of scripture, prayer and sharing life in the community of faith. When we understand that God's intention is to delight in us by pouring His love into us, we find that we are more willing and eager to engage in the work of transformation. We discover that it is through the transforming reading of the scriptures and sharing in the dialogue and conversation of prayer that we are captivated by Him. From the beginning to the end, the Scriptures speak of God's longing for His people and points us in the direction of transforming grace that covers our sin. As the scriptures come alive to us in our lives, the bible becomes more to us than a theological textbook and prayer becomes more to us than the punching in requests as to a bank machine. Ultimately, what is at stake is whether or not we will respond to the Trinity with a desire of engagement and obedience. Peterson recognizes the challenge when he says "it means letting Another have a say in everything we are saying and doing. It is as easy as that. And as hard."<sup>16</sup>

## Nothing Outside His Attention

The attention to and intention towards spiritual formation cannot help but bring noticeable changes into the dailyness of our lives. The more we are shaped by the Author of our lives, the more we will recognize His leading, His movement and His grace towards us. Having been redeemed by God through Christ, the Holy Spirit allows the believer to experiences and become aware of one being transformation to be like Jesus.

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<sup>16</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation on the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), xii.

The seemingly jagged line that divides the sacred and secular becomes thinner and straighter as through every experience and circumstance, trust is known that reveals that there is nothing outside the realm of God's attention and loving care towards His sons and daughters.<sup>17</sup>

The formative question asks whether or not one will freely surrender to the vision of the life God has created for us? Can we trust the living water that flows through the scriptures and prayer and be willing to get out of the way for what God might do with us? We already know that God is eager for us to be shaped to be like His Son, Jesus. The challenge for us is to allow Him to complete His work in us no matter where it might take us.<sup>18</sup>

### The Incarnation and Grief

Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

—Hebrews 4. 14-16

The community of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit becomes personally impactful with the Incarnation of the Son among us. Paul suggests what it meant for Jesus to leave the Trinity to dwell among us in his letter to the Philippians: though he (Jesus) was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of the Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), 272.

<sup>18</sup> Foster, *Life With God*, 7.

human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:1-11). The message is clear that Jesus came to be a part of the chaos of our lives with all its brokenness and its resulting pain, suffering and grief. Surely, there would be moments of great joy as He lived on earth, but His purpose was to meet us at our points of great sorrow.

The signs were all there from the beginning. Whatever was to take place in the life of Jesus, there would be grief experienced by those closest to Him. How often did Mary ponder the words of Simeon spoken on the day she brought her baby boy to the Temple? “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35). Was she reminded of those words when her twelve year old son was found conversing with the wise men at the temple? Did those words become a reality for her that day at the foot of the cross as she gazed at her Son, her Savior?

### Theology of The Cross

The Suffering Savior was not the expectation as to how God would restore and redeem His people. Even among contemporary believers there exists the expectation and longing for a God who is strong and mighty and whose followers possess visible blessings and abundant success. Martin Luther recognized the same mind-set among the church leaders of his day. Luther contrasted what was theologically prominent as a ‘theology of glory’ to a ‘theology of the cross’ where the character of God, His authority

and His Power are known and experienced in His weakness, suffering, and death on a cross.<sup>19</sup>

The God revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ is one who suffers, who is wounded by our tragedies and hurts because of our sorrow. The God seen in Jesus is a God who lost an only Son on a cross; a God who does not punish us for our sins, but rather suffers our punishment Himself. This God is a God who cares and cries for those he loves.<sup>20</sup> Keller expands the implication when he says:

the idea that the Prince of Heaven would empty himself and become poor, to live and dwell among us is humbling. The idea that there is nothing in the human experience that God himself has not suffered, even losing a child is sustaining. And the idea that in His resurrection, Jesus' scars became His glory is empowering. God will use these scars for His glory, as they become our glory.<sup>21</sup>

It was only through His weakness and pain that God showed us in the deepest way possible the depths of His grace and love for us. In one all-encompassing move, Jesus fulfilled the requirements of the law securing the forgiveness for lawbreakers for all time. During the moments of suffering on the cross, God's justice and love were fully satisfied. Jesus was indeed the conquering Messiah but He did it through weakness and suffering.<sup>22</sup>

### Jesus' Suffering and Grief

It is in fact Jesus' experience of weakness and suffering that some say draws them to Him. If Jesus has known the reality of suffering and grief, then He knows exactly how

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<sup>19</sup> Timothy Keller, *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Dutton, 2013), 50.

<sup>20</sup> Donald Messer, "Patches of Godlight," in *Reflections on Grief and Spiritual Growth*, ed. Andrew J. Weaver and Howard W. Stone (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 83.

<sup>21</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 63.

<sup>22</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 51.

one feel's in their personal suffering and grief. Revealing her many years of physical suffering from Crohn's disease as she spoke at the National Prayer Breakfast in

Washington, DC, in February, 2013, Kathy Keller spoke these words:

I am deeply comforted to know that I have a God who is no stranger to suffering. Christians believe that we have a God who knows what it's like to bear the worst affliction, and has done it on our behalf. Whatever troubles come to us, the worst trouble is over because Jesus has reconciled us to God.<sup>23</sup>

In her book, *One Thousand Gifts*, Ann Voskamp further guides an understanding of Jesus' suffering on the cross and its importance for our own suffering when she writes:

If God did not withhold from us His very own Son, will God withhold anything we need? If trust must be earned, hasn't God unequivocally earned our trust with the bark on the raw wounds, the thorns pressed into the brow, your name on the cracked lips? How will he not also graciously give us all things He deems best and right? He's already given us the incomprehensible.<sup>24</sup>

When in deep grief, it is of great importance to know and trust a God who cares and grieves; a God who does not stand on the outside of personal suffering and sorrow simply observing pain and predicaments from a distance. Rather, the biblically revealed God is personally involved in and does not shy away from any of my pain.<sup>25</sup>

### Trusting Him with Suffering

Whatever the circumstances, no matter the depth of grief, the invitation from God to His people is always to look to the Cross. It is there on the Cross that the Father's heart is seen and known. A loving Father who 'did not spare even His own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Rom 8:32). By gazing on Jesus' enormous suffering and what it represents on our behalf, it becomes

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<sup>23</sup> Kathy Keller, *Don't Waste Your Sorrow*. Address at the National Prayer Breakfast, Washington, D.C., February, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Ann Voskamp, *One Thousand Gifts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), quoted in Keller, *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering*, 122.

<sup>25</sup> Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 231.

clear that through His willing and chosen suffering, Jesus is now able to draw us to himself. Therefore, we need not fear or hold back from giving ourselves into His care.

“Christ also suffered. He died once for the sins of all us guilty sinners although he himself was innocent of any sin at any time, that he might bring us safely home to God” (1 Pet 3:18). Jesus Christ suffered, not so that we would never suffer but so that when we do, we would be like Him. His suffering led to glory. If you know that glory is coming, it becomes possible, even if it feels only remotely possible, to handle suffering, too.<sup>26</sup>

In John Stott’s reflection of the suffering of Jesus on the cross, he said, “I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross...In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?”<sup>27</sup> Stott offers the last stanza of a poem by Edward Shiloto, a minister who had lived through the horrors of the First World War, only to see the unfathomable horrors in the Second World War, to express his belief well. Shiloto writes about trusting in God because he did not remain aloof and safe, but entered his broken world in order to redeem it:

The other gods were strong;  
but thou wast weak;  
they rode, but thou didst stumble to a throne;  
But to our wounds only God’s wounds can speak,  
And not a god has wounds, but thou alone.<sup>28</sup>

If Christianity is to have any meaning at all in our time and place, then the incarnation of Jesus tells us that He did not just float above the chaos of our pain; nor did he live among us as an invincible superhero kept safe from experiencing suffering and

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<sup>26</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 181.

<sup>27</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 326.

<sup>28</sup> Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 326.

feeling pain. Rather, Jesus knows my pain, my suffering, my grief intimately and that changes everything.

So when difficult news is delivered in a doctor's office, when a phone call brings words that are life-changing,, when the streaming news on a smartphone captures more chaos and heartache, the question that continually rises to the top for those who have known Him and for those who have kept him at a distance is simply this: where, exactly, can God be found in all of this? It is the incarnation of Jesus that repeats over and over that He has descended into the very thick of it and will be found there.<sup>29</sup>

### Meaning in Suffering

In the days of his flesh Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

—Hebrews 5:7-9

Quick to follow the question of where God is in pain an suffering is whether or not there is any meaning to be found in suffering at all? Keller offers that in spite of the steady stream of news, the knowledge of history and our personal experience, ours is among the first culture to be surprised by suffering.<sup>30</sup> We work hard to push back the boundaries of suffering to the point that it is no longer a daily personal experience and go to great effort to keep it that way. When we do suffer, it is treated as an aberration, the result of someone's mistake or lack. Until most recently, it was easy to live in our

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<sup>29</sup> Scott Cairns, *The End of Suffering* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2009), 108.

<sup>30</sup> Timothy Keller, "Suffering: The Servant of Our Joy," in *Be Still My Soul*, ed. Nancy Guthrie (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 15.



industrialized country for long stretches of time under the delusion that suffering will not happen or it will not impact us directly. But the evidence is clear that we will suffer in some way, shape or form and so we would be wise to prepare mentally before it does.<sup>31</sup>

Even with the cognitive understanding of the suffering of Jesus and its purpose, we still have an expectation that if God is good, then He will bring only what we consider to be good things into our lives. It does not occur to us that He would allow and even bring challenges into our lives, especially in the lives of those who know and love Him. But the revelation of scripture and the experience of our lives is that He does.<sup>32</sup> The apostle Paul encouraged the churches in Rome and Corinth that their sufferings were temporary. But temporary suffering is still suffering (Rom 8:17-18; 2 Cor 4:17).

The reality that is shied away from is that oftentimes people who follow God suffer and oftentimes, in more ways. “But,” you say, “God does not willingly afflict his children” and that’s true. For His people are not cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men (Lam 3:31-33).<sup>33</sup>

### What God Is Up To

So then what is God up to when His children suffer? Does it mean that the suffering feels “lighter” for those who really are children of God? Not at all. It means

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<sup>31</sup> Keller, *Don't Waste Your Sorrow*.

<sup>32</sup> Nancy Guthrie, *Holding On To Hope* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale Publishers, 2002), 39.

<sup>33</sup> Guthrie, *Holding On To Hope*, 40.

that their suffering is not meaningless. The God who is good and can be trusted, allows suffering into our lives for a purpose that is both good and holy.<sup>34</sup>

How different is that view of suffering from everything else that tells us that suffering is to be avoided at all costs, even when those costs are detrimental in the long run. If there is anything that Christianity has to say to contemporary, pain-denying, suffering avoiding culture it can be found in the words of Simone Weil: “The extreme greatness of Christianity lies not in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering, but a supernatural use for it.”<sup>35</sup>

It is when suffering appears to be random with no explanation or purpose that any redemptive point of suffering is missed completely. Recounting his experience in a German prison camp in World War II, Viktor Frankl famously wrote about the meaning that the prisoners found in their suffering. “If there is meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete.”<sup>36</sup>

### What’s the Point?

Affliction, suffering and pain are remarkably effective at getting our attention. It can be suggested that personal suffering obliges us to glimpse and to appreciate a somewhat bigger picture of what is going on in our world.<sup>37</sup> C. S. Lewis in *The Problem*

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<sup>34</sup> Guthrie, *Holding On To Hope*, 40.

<sup>35</sup> Cairns, *The End of Suffering*, 114.

<sup>36</sup> Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 80-81.

<sup>37</sup> Cairns, *The End of Suffering*, 11.

*of Pain* convincingly observed that “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”<sup>38</sup>

What does it look like to respond in meaningful ways to our pain and suffering? Personal meaning comes through asking questions of God and figuring out how to be present to what God is doing in shaping our souls. Finding meaning in suffering will be frustrated if a bottom-line answer is what is sought. Because Jesus engages with us in our suffering in a personal way, we can expect that the meaning that will be found will be just as personal.

Pressing for meaning will come when one chooses to sit in the darkness of suffering and allowing God to speak in ways He cannot when life is full of light and goodness. A. B. Simpson in *Days of Heaven Upon Earth* offered that, “suffering presses for meaning, seeks God in the midst of pain and chooses to rest in incomplete answers. Meaning comes through worshiping God even with the incomplete answers and coming to know God’s love more deeply.”<sup>39</sup>

### Suffering with Purpose

But finding incomplete answers does not mean that we are left with a disappointing sense of forced acceptance and resignation. While some questions and answers may appear incomplete, the purpose of suffering can be known now:

Do you want to know who you are, your strengths and weaknesses? Do you want to be a compassionate person who skillfully helps people who are hurting? Do you want to have such a profound trust in God that you are fortified against the disappointments of life? Do you want simply to be wise about how life goes? Those are four crucial things to have but none of them are readily achievable

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<sup>38</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 83.

<sup>39</sup> Jamison Dickson, *Just Fifteen* (Mustang, OK: Tate Publishing, 2014), 128.

without suffering. There is no way to know who you really are until you are tested. There is no way to really empathize and sympathize with other suffering people unless you have suffered yourself. There is no way to really learn how to trust in God until you are drowning.<sup>40</sup>

Is it possible that God find delight in watching His children feel as though they are drowning? Not at all as He knows there is a purpose to be found in the experience of suffering. First, those who endure and get through suffering become more resilient. Resilience is important to those who seek to live faithfully in a time and place that fights against such faithfulness. Those who have known God's care and faithfulness in their suffering will be able to do it again with the possibility of less anxiety when suffering comes again, as it surely will. Paul sums it up with "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (Rom 5:3-4).<sup>41</sup>

Secondly, suffering produces growth in us only when we understand Christ's suffering and work on our behalf. Luther believed and taught that Christians cannot imitate His patience and love when under pressure 'before they have embraced the full benefits of Christ's suffering for them' in their place. Luther was well aware that suffering tears us apart if we are uncertain of God's love for us. We must rest in the sufficiency of Christ's sufferings for us before we can even begin to respond to suffering as He did.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, because the impact of suffering is rarely experienced alone, shared suffering strengthens relationships, usually bonding the sufferer permanently into a set of deeper friendships or family ties that serve to nurture and strengthen for years. When

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<sup>40</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 234.

<sup>41</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 52.

<sup>42</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 52.

suffering has been shared with another there arises a knowing or understanding that goes far beyond any casual acquaintance. The experience of suffering changes priorities and philosophies when we find our purposes and intentions are ones that reflect the image of God.<sup>43</sup>

The good news of the gospel is that suffering and even a sense of drowning are not the end but are surely temporary. For after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen (1 Peter 5:10-11).

#### Jesus and Death

Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died.”

—John 11:21

While suffering will be experienced in a wide of variety of ways and causes, the suffering that leads to death is the one that no doubt is feared the most. Even when one has a faith and belief in life eternal after death in the presence of Jesus, one’s view of death is important one as we experience the death of others and as we approach our own.

Crouch suggests that deep within the human heart, there is the understanding that the last enemy to be conquered is in fact, death. It remains the last enemy not just because it ends life here on earth, but the fear of death controls and prevents real life in the present. In *Strong and Weak*, Andy Crouch offers that the fear of death has robbed

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<sup>43</sup> Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, 165.

our world of more life and more flourish than any other actual loss that we could suffer.<sup>44</sup> But even placing a distance between suffering and death cannot change the feeling of overwhelming vulnerability when standing by the casket of one who has been loved.

## Two Realities

Life is lived in the middle of two realities: physical and spiritual. Because one cannot see or touch the spiritual, it is easy to focus on the physical. Especially when it comes to death and dying one tends to linger longer on the deterioration of the body than on the restoration of the soul. The focus is more on the physical life that is leaving than on the spiritual life being given. It is tempting to start seeing death through the wrong lens so God's perspective on suffering and death is what is needed. Paul is careful to remind us of this:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Cor 4:16-18)

Of all people, Christians should approach death in a way that recognizes its reality, but also embraces the desire to experience and know the presence of God in ways not previously imagined to be possible. The sons and daughter of God can walk through the gates of death in a different way. The apostle Paul proclaimed it when he wrote:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs - heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may be glorified with him. (Rom 8:14-17)

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<sup>44</sup> Andy Crouch, *Strong and Weak* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 147.

## The Sting of Death

Engaging with death in a different way does not suddenly bring a great sense of peace and calm as it approaches. The apostle Paul writes, “Where O death is your victory? Where O death is your sting? The sting of death is sin” (1 Cor 15:55-56). While Paul declares Christ’s ultimate victory over death, his metaphorical use of the word “sting” honestly recognizes the painful nature of death. The Greek word for sting, *kentron*, is used primarily as a reference to the sting of insects, particularly scorpions which Paul is clearly referencing in these verses. Understanding its full biblical meaning brings us closer to how deeply the sting of death can penetrate our life. Take note how the “sting” is described in Revelation:<sup>45</sup>

Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone. And in those days people will seek death, and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will free from them. They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. (Rev 9:3-6, 10)

While it is a biblical passage that is certainly hard to read it is one that is important for what it says about the experience of death. As John writes in Revelation, the *kentron*, the sting, was so painful that people sought death to end its unbearable torture. Such is the power of the word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 15:55. The sting of death wounds deeply causing physical, emotional and spiritual pain. It can cause penetrating pain so vast that one no longer wants to live and death feels like relief. This

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<sup>45</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 797.

is not just the annoying bite of a mosquito but rather a devastating, torturous, unrelenting wound. Death stings deeply and pervasively regardless of how it happens.<sup>46</sup>

### The Last Enemy

Paul speaks clearly to the Corinthians that death not only is a torturous sting but is indeed our last enemy. Death is a harsh, abrupt intruder into our world and was not part of the original design. Keller reminds us how death came in to the created order:

We were never meant to die; we were meant to last. We were meant to get more and beautiful with time, not more and more shriveled. We were meant to get stronger and stronger, not weaker and weaker. We were meant to get brighter and brighter, not to fade. Death wasn't part of the original design. Jesus' response to death shows that death is a monstrosity, an abnormality.<sup>47</sup>

In Romans 8:5-8, Paul reminds Christ-followers that when we decided to be our own saviors and lords, everything in creation broke. Our bodies broke; the world broke; life broke. It is in that brokenness, that death reigns. Death is our enemy and part of learning to live in this world where death still reigns and has the power to sting is to acknowledge that it is indeed our enemy. Death is not a benign, harmless friend, but is our dreaded foe. It is not a natural part of life, but the most unnatural part of life as it is so far removed from God's original design.

In *Death's Sting Is Removed But Its Bite Remains*, Horton says "this last enemy will one day be overcome for believers in the final resurrection of the dead, but that is because it has already objectively been vanquished in the resurrection of our Living Head. In Christ, the end has already begun. The Head will not live without his body.

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<sup>46</sup> David Swanson, *Everlasting Life* (Downers Grove, IL: Baker Books, 2013), 42.

<sup>47</sup> Timothy Keller, "Rubbing Hope Into the Reality of Death," in *Reflections On Grief and Spiritual Growth*, ed. Nancy Guthrie (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 88.



The shape of the future is already present.”<sup>48</sup> Such a great hope does not deny the reality of facing the last enemy now.

### Responding To the Enemy

Somewhere the pressure has surfaced among many Christians that the appropriate witness for those who have the hope of the resurrection is not to cry or express deep grief. Who defines what an appropriate witness to grief is to be? Too often, those in grief are made to feel that somehow they may disappoint God in how they handle their grief. As we have seen, scripture clearly proclaims that death hurts; it stings in what feels like an unrelenting way. Even still, too often, we need permission to express it fully.<sup>49</sup> Whether it is through the words of the psalmist (Ps 35:22; 40:2; 44:25-26) or the lament of the prophet (Lam 3:19-33) God reveals a caring and honest response to the grief experienced when facing death. The account of the grief experienced by the sisters of Lazarus acknowledges both the depth of grief and God’s response to it.

### Lazarus and His Sisters

The beloved disciple, John, records the story of Jesus bearing the suffering and sorrow of those He loves as they face the death of one they love. It is the reality and pain of death that in fact draws God’s tears (John 11:35). Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary who were well known by Jesus, had been near death. The sisters had sent for the One they knew whose very presence could keep their brother from dying. Their plea for

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<sup>48</sup> Michael S. Horton, “Death’s Sting Is Removed but Its Bite Remains,” in *O Love That Will Not Let Me Go*, ed. Nancy Guthrie (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 24.

<sup>49</sup> Swanson, *Everlasting Life*, 44.

Jesus was not wrong, but Jesus had another intention and purpose in his delayed arrival. At first glance, the story appears to be about Lazarus, but as the story unfolds, the story is really about Jesus. The glorification of the Son as the Messiah in the face of death is the real story.<sup>50</sup>

Martha's encounter with Jesus upon His arrival reveals someone who has experienced an understanding, a spiritual formation if you will, towards understanding who Jesus is. Her confidence in her declaration that if Jesus had been there her brother would not have died reveals a heart-wrenching disappointment. Is Jesus really who she thought He was? Jesus replies, "Your brother will rise again...Do you believe this" (John 11:23, 26)? Jesus presses her to commit herself not just to the theological question of the resurrection of the dead, but to him as the Resurrection and the Life. He not only can give life: He is Life. Her clear affirmation that she believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who has come into the world is made in spite of her own suffering and disappointment (John 11.28).<sup>51</sup>

Martha seeks out her sister Mary who is both physically and figuratively locked up in the darkness with her grief. Mary who had sat at Jesus' feet having chosen the better thing of learning from the rabbi is now overcome with overwhelming grief at the death of her brother. Should she not have been grieving? Absolutely, she should have been grieving with all of her heart and soul. But she needed to be reminded that the only One who could meet her in her grief, the only One who would understand it through and through, was in fact now asking for her. When Mary is told by her sister that "the

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<sup>50</sup> Horton, "Death's Sting Is Removed But Its Bite Remains," 24.

<sup>51</sup> Horton, "Death's Sting Is Removed But Its Bite Remains," 24.

Teacher is here and He is calling for you” (John 11:28) she takes off running to see Jesus face to face and to pour out her grief and anguish from her brother’s death. Certainly, her disappointment in Jesus’ delayed arrival would have been churning in her in that moment. Mary echoes Martha’s words with her own declaration that if Jesus had been there, her brother would still be alive. Seeing and experiencing the grief and despondency surrounding the death of this brother and His friend, Jesus weeps (John 11:28-35).

Here is what is amazing: He knew that in just a few moments He would bring Lazarus back from death. He knew that, at least in that one moment, He was going to defeat death for that family, and yet He still felt the sting of death and knew death’s pain. And so it is with us. One can know all about the promise of Easter. One can know every detail about the glory of heaven, but this side of that heaven, death’s sting and death itself are still known to be the last enemy. Jesus showed the appropriate response to death.<sup>52</sup> If Jesus knew it and wept, then it is okay for us to know it too. We have the permission to acknowledge the sting of death and the pain it creates in life.<sup>53</sup>

Lazarus was raised that day in front of his sisters and his community, but at a different day in his future, he would indeed die and be placed in the tomb. Mourners would gather again at Lazarus’s tomb, most likely, remembering the day when Jesus had been present. But this time there would be a different expectation. Because Lazarus’ second funeral occurred on this side of Easter, they would mourn that day but not as those with no hope. Word would have reached them by then of the greater resurrection of Jesus himself. In His victorious resurrection, He would take a stand against death on

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<sup>52</sup> Horton, “Death’s Sting Is Removed But Its Bite Remains,” 24.

<sup>53</sup> Swanson, *Everlasting Life*, 44.

its own territory, so that those united to him by faith will not remain dead, but by believing in Him will have eternal life (John 3:15).<sup>54</sup>

Jesus could have revealed something different, something lighter that day about death. But instead, he showed sadness, grief and anguish. How much more then are we allowed to weep when such an interval exists between the death of loved ones and the final resurrection! Theologically, deep grief is the appropriate response to death. Not simply because of the sense of loss or the mourning for the survivors but because of the loss of the beloved who has died. Swanson, in *Everlasting Life*, affirms that

death is not a benign passageway to happiness, but a horrible enemy attempting to keep us in the grave. Death's sting has been removed, but its bite remains. It does not have the last word for believers, but it remains the believer's antagonist until the resurrection of the body. The good news is never that one has died but that death has been ultimately conquered by the Lord of Life.<sup>55</sup>

### Hope

I want you to be informed brothers...that you may not grieve as others who have no hope.

—1 Thessalonians 4:13

When Jesus declared to Martha that He was the Resurrection and the Life, He pointed her beyond her momentary grief and suffering to look beyond the heart breaking circumstances in front of her (John 11:25). Jesus offered her more than just wishful thinking. From that point on, death would be seen as the last enemy, but no longer would it have the final word. Jesus pointed the grieving sister to the one thing that would guide her grief that day and in the days to come. He pointed her towards hope.

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<sup>54</sup> Horton, "Death's Sting Is Removed But Its Bite Remains," 25.

<sup>55</sup> Swanson, *Everlasting Life*, 123.

When the word “hope” is used in scripture, it has a much fuller meaning than the way it is commonly understood. It’s biblical understanding means a life shaping, joyous certainty of something.<sup>56</sup> In his sermon, “Living in Two Worlds,” Erwin Luther provides a definition that speaks to the way hope intersects with our lives: hope is the interval between the promises of God and the fulfillment of God’s promises.<sup>57</sup>

Living in such a place does not mean a time of empty living and waiting for an unknown outcome. Writing in *The Ingenious Alchemist*, John Claypool notes that one of the most telling insights into the character of God in all of scripture is His amazing ability to take the most destructive things we face and transform them into good. What the ancient alchemists tried to do in turning the substance of lead into gold is a vivid image of this most incredible divine characteristic.<sup>58</sup> As the “Ingenious Alchemist”, God can move through thick and thin and the very worst of times to still do the best things. It is this theological vision that can move one from a life of fear and despair to a life of courage and hopeful coping.<sup>59</sup>

Claypool noted that he was not alone in his theological vision but that Frederick Buechner shared the same sense of surprise that God always seemed to have something up his amazing sleeve. Again and again, the scriptures revealed that “the seemingly worst things were never the last things.”<sup>60</sup> Rather than remaining neutral toward the

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<sup>56</sup> Keller, “Rubbing Hope Into the Reality of Death,” 91.

<sup>57</sup> Erwin Lutzer, “Living In Two Worlds” sermon preached at Moody Church Sunday Service, Chicago, IL, on May 6, 2012. Quoted by Jamison Dickson, *Just Fifteen* (Mustang, OK: Tate Publishing), 16.

<sup>58</sup> John R. Claypool, *God The Ingenious Alchemist: Transforming Tragedy into Blessing* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2005), xxv.

<sup>59</sup> Claypool, *God The Ingenious Alchemist*, xxv.

<sup>60</sup> Claypool, *God The Ingenious Alchemist*, 4.

possibilities of the future, the revelation of scripture is that it is possible for one to embrace the grounds for future hope even while experiencing grief and suffering.<sup>61</sup>

The revelation of scripture and the substance of life experience affirms that Christians are not immune from the pain of bereavement, the emptiness of loss and all the pain that comes when the life of one whom we have loved is taken from us. When Jesus declared Himself to be the Resurrection and the Life, He did not negate Martha's experience of great grief at the death of her brother. It was the hope that Jesus offered to her that served to put her grief (and ours) in its place.<sup>62</sup>

### The Substance of Hope

When Paul wrote his first letter to the church at Thessalonica, he addressed concerns that had surfaced among the believers about death, hope and what was to come. Paul acknowledged that they had every reason to grieve but that there was a way that they would be able to grieve that was different: I want you to be informed brothers... that you may grieve but not as others who have no hope (1 Thess 4:13). Paul wanted them to take their anger and their grief at the last enemy and to rub hope into it, the way people used to rub salt into meat to keep it from going bad. The result was an understanding and a wisdom that allowed them to grieve differently.

Keller offers that "not to grieve kills your humanity. Just to rage kills your humanity. But to press hope into your grief makes you wise and compassionate. It makes you humble and tender."<sup>63</sup> In essence, hope in grief brings about a transformation

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<sup>61</sup> Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Stranger*, 16.

<sup>62</sup> William H. Willimon, "Preface," in *Reflections on Grief and Spiritual Growth*, ed. Andrew J. Weaver and Howard W. Stone (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 9.

<sup>63</sup> Keller, "Rubbing Hope Into the Reality of Death," 87.

in the griever. In his letter, Paul sets up the contrast between what it means to grieve without hope and to grieve with it. Paul guided them to embrace the uniqueness of their hope by taking hold and appropriating what is offered to believers in Christ. Knowing and trusting in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Paul knew that Christian hope is overwhelmingly greater than any other hope that is offered.<sup>64</sup>

### The Uniqueness of Christian Hope

Other religions and cultures may say there is life after death, but none provide the assurance of it. The Christian hope says, “He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him” (1 Thess.5:10). Jesus took the wrath. He died for us. The sting of death is sin and the poison went into Jesus. “And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power” (1 Cor 6:14).

For Paul, the Christian hope was dramatically different from all the other offerings in what it put forward. Keller offers that the hope that believers have in life after death, was no illusion, but a rather a future of infinite love.<sup>65</sup> Paul repeatedly spoke to the Thessalonians about a time of being together. But even more importantly, Paul looked to the day when they would all be together with Christ (1 Thess 4:17).

Paul addressed the concerns for those “who are left till the coming of the Lord” (1 Thess 4:15). The Greek word *parousia* is sometimes translated ‘appearing of the Lord’ rather than “the coming of the Lord” but it typically referred to the arrival of a great personage, a king or an emperor. Paul was saying that the real hope would be found in

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<sup>64</sup> Keller, “Rubbing Hope Into the Reality of Death,” 89.

<sup>65</sup> Keller, “Rubbing Hope Into the Reality of Death,” 89.

looking forward to not just the coming of the Lord or the appearing of the Lord, but personally obtaining the Lord. Paul looked toward the time of intimate, face-to-face knowing of Him in full: For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known (1 Cor 13:12). At the coming of the Lord, Paul was convinced that believers would have what they have always longed for from Him: being completely known and completely loved.<sup>66</sup>

Paul further believed that Christian hope meant that believers would one day live with Christ in a new earth, where there not only is no more death, but where life will be what it was always meant to be from the beginning.

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. (1 Thess 4:16-17)

The passage is not saying that believers will be caught up and taken out of the world into heaven. It means that they will be caught up with the risen Christ on his way to earth to make it everything it ought to be, including participation in his victory.<sup>67</sup> For Paul, such hope meant that death itself no longer need instill fear for the future, because it has already been defeated through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who will one day return to earth to make all things new.

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<sup>66</sup> Keller, "Rubbing Hope Into the Reality of Death," 89.

<sup>67</sup> Keller, "Rubbing Hope Into the Reality of Death," 90.



## Future Hope in Daily Life

Whatever belief one holds about the ultimate future, it will shape one's character and daily life. Paul declared, "You are all sons of the light and sons of the day" (1 Thess 5:5). In other words, the day is coming when Jesus will make this tangible, material universe new. For Paul the implication was therefore that believers could in fact grieve now but with the hope that they will live in this world of death with the hope of that future light.<sup>68</sup>

Certainly great words but is it possible to really live that way? Many would say that Joni Eareckson Tada has lived that way for more than fifty years in such a world of death with the reality of a future hope. Paralyzed at the age of seventeen in a diving accident, Joni has earned the authority to speak and to be heard when it comes to the Christian hope to which she holds. Joni affirms the real connection between hardship and heaven when she recognizes that suffering tunes our hearts and senses and makes us want to go to heavenward:

When you come to know that the (temporal) hopes you have cherished will never come true, that your loved one is gone from this life forever, that you will never be as pretty or successful or famous as you had once imagined, your sights are lifted beyond your circumstances. You long and look forward to the day when your hopes will be fulfilled and heartache will vanish. The glorious day when 'we will be whole' becomes your passion as you realize, that once and for all, earth can never meet your deepest longings.<sup>69</sup>

A broken, grieving heart learns to ask less of this life when there is the real hope that more is coming in the next. Living with suffering becomes the art of readjusting expectations and longings in the here and now and orienting oneself to the future hope. It

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<sup>68</sup> Keller, "Rubbing Hope Into the Reality of Death," 91.

<sup>69</sup> Joni Eareckson Tada, "Suffering Hurries the Heart Toward Heaven," in *O Love That Will Not Let Me Go*, ed. Nancy Guthrie (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 122.

is such yielding that brings about the most gains in daily life here on earth. A heart that is full with the assurance of faith gives conviction to the unseen but true divine realities and future divine fulfillments (Heb 10:22).<sup>70</sup>

### The Hope Jesus Gives

The followers and friends of Jesus saw him and heard him just a few times after the resurrection, but their lives were completely changed. Death that seemed to be the end proved in fact to be the beginning. Where before they cowered in fear, the resurrected Jesus gave them cause for courage. Where His death seemed to be a defeat; His resurrection proved to be a victory. As Nouwen says so distinctly, “What seemed to be the basis for despair proved to be the basis for hope. Suddenly a wall became a gate, and although we are not able to say with complete clarity or precision what lies beyond that gate, the tone of all that we do and say on our way to the gate changes drastically.”<sup>71</sup>

Such is the biblical and theological framework for finding meaning in suffering, living with hope beyond momentary affliction and finding that Jesus meets us in our grief and suffering so that we may fully bear His image. The words of the poet, Christian Wiman, bring together our longing to firmly grasp what God has for us in our times of suffering and grief:

My God my bright abyss  
into which all my longing will not go  
once more I come to the edge of all I know  
and believing nothing believe in this.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Tada, “Suffering Hurries the Heart Towards Heaven,” 123.

<sup>71</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Letter of Consolation* (New York: HarperCollins, 1982), 91.

<sup>72</sup> Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013), 3.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Everything difficult indicates something more than our theory of life yet embraces.

—George McDonald

Pastors and ministry leaders are on the frontline of providing grief care and support to individuals and families in their ministry settings. However, many find themselves ill-equipped to provide effective grief care as pastoral care training frequently addresses grief as one among many topics to be encountered in ministry. Grief concerns surface frequently as a significant point of pastoral care among individuals on many different levels. However, most pastors are typically unaware of both the changing and current research and grief theory that could enlighten and guide the care that they offer.

The question to be addressed in this literature review is whether there are accurate and dependable paths or theories to understand and address the emotional, psycho-social and spiritual needs of one who is grieving? Recent research in the field of grief indicates that well-known and well-worn understandings of grief and its trajectory are in fact inadequate in giving full expression to the unique complexities and variations of grief. Pastors and ministry leaders will find it helpful to know what conclusions and applications have resulted from such research as it may guide them in offering pastoral care during times of grief. Frequently, a presenting need for pastoral care can be traced back to an earlier experience of grief. Pastors and ministry leaders will benefit from an understanding of the impact of grief and the spiritual formation opportunity it presents for individuals as they grieve.

For the last thirty years, researchers have moved from grief theories based on anecdotal information to empirical research in order to understand the experience of grief. Most recently secular grief researchers, theorists and clinicians have revisited and challenged many of the long-accepted theories of grief.<sup>1</sup> The intersection of contemporary theories and grief research with pastoral care will be examined as to their effectiveness in guiding the individual in their experience of grief.

### Contemporary Grief Culture

What does it mean to lose someone? Does grief feel the same each time? Is it the same for everyone? Is there always deep pain and anguish? How long does it last? How long should it last? What if someone doesn't appear to grieve enough? What if someone talks about an ongoing connection to the person who died? Is that normal?<sup>2</sup> Such are the questions that surface around the experience of grief in our western, contemporary culture.

Just as there are many voices responding with answers to such questions so there are many explanations and determinations for how grief is to be experienced. If it is known that the way life and death, love and meaning, sadness and joy is experienced in a complexity of ways then it would appear to be impossible to determine specifically how grief will be experienced by each individual at all times and in all circumstances.

If grief therapists are the only ones to offer an explanation for understanding the experience of grief then that understanding will fall short. The perspective of grief

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<sup>1</sup> Melissa M. Kelley, *Grief: Contemporary Theory and Practice of Ministry* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>2</sup> George A. Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2009), 3.

therapists will perhaps be limited as they encounter mostly those seeking professional help who believe that such support is necessary for emotional survival. While listening to a wide range of stories of grief may be compelling, such stories will not sufficiently tell all there is to know as to how grief is experienced by most people. Likewise, the availability and abundance of self-help books on the topic portray a view of grief that involves a paralyzing season of sadness, an unrelenting anguish that removes one from the norms of daily life and an inability to function as before.<sup>3</sup>

The result is that contemporary grief culture has created a high level of anxiety by promoting two separate but connecting beliefs: 1) that grief is necessarily lengthy and debilitating; and 2) the only way out is to work through it in a series of stages, steps, tasks, phases, passages or needs. It is in fact these two beliefs that have been challenged as vague and inaccurate by recent research, yet such views remain prominent in the collective thinking and are unavoidable to anyone looking for guidance about their grief.<sup>4</sup>

In the increasingly complex emotional landscape found in western contemporary culture, grief is commonly viewed as a “process” or a “journey” to be completed, as well as an opportunity for growth. As our western culture has moved to a post-modern and post-Christian world-view, society has been stripped of religious faith and ritual that no longer provides adequate and satisfying support for those who are grieving. With the vacuum of religious faith that previously provided a viable understanding and expression of grief, a new belief system rooted in the principles of psychotherapy has moved to the forefront to aid in understanding the grief experience.

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<sup>3</sup> Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Davis Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief: The Myth of the Five Stages and the New Science of Loss* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 40.

## History of Grief Research

The limited grief research that began in the middle of the last century did not provide much clarity for the specific characteristics of grief. Neither did such research provide guidance as to what could be anticipated in the experience of grief. Initial grief research that rose to prominence was done regarding tragic circumstances and grief situations that were experienced by a small number of individuals and most likely would not be experienced by the general public.<sup>5</sup> The common experiences of a death such as that of a spouse or parent were not the focus of early research. The results found in studies that were done on tragic or horrific deaths became a part of the common understanding of grief.

In 1944, Eric Lindemann, an American psychiatrist, published what is considered the first study of bereavement and a foundational exploration of the topic entitled *Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief*.<sup>6</sup> Lindemann had studied survivors of the infamous Coconut Grove nightclub fire that took place in Boston in 1942. Having no significant previous research to rely on, Lindemann viewed grief primarily as a medical problem. In his study, Lindemann offered the concept of absent grief suggesting that psychological problems could be traced back to an earlier, unresolved grief reaction. He further argued that even outwardly healthy responses to loss were suspect and that no matter how healthy bereaved people might appear, or how much they might seem to have moved on, a hidden unresolved grief might still be present in their unconscious.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Lindemann, "Symptomatology and Acute Grief," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 101 (1944): 141-48.

<sup>7</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 44.

Lindemann's study offered important new principles that would serve to guide additional theories including the concept of "grief work" (emancipation from the bondage to the deceased, readjustment to the environment in which the deceased is missing, and the formation of new relationships) as well as different types of morbid grief reactions. Lindemann's work made the study of grief a possibility but it was far removed from addressing the grief that is experienced in the natural course of life.<sup>8</sup>

Forty years later, the Institute of Medicine reported that the lack of a reliable tool to measure grief was a barrier to support the grieving. Practitioners found it almost impossible to capture all of the expressions of the emotional and psychological upheaval that can take place after a loved one dies.<sup>9</sup> Currently, there are more than twenty different instruments or questionnaires that are commonly used in grief support from the Texas Revised Inventory of Grief to the Hogan Grief Reaction Checklist. Together, the combined instruments suggest the possibility of six to sixty seven different symptoms of grief such as "I have little control over my sadness" or "I frequently feel bitter" or "I am stronger because of the grief I have experienced."<sup>10</sup> The lack of an agreed upon understanding for grief did not slow down the stream of grief theories but rather opened up a wide variety of possibilities and nuances as to what grief looks like and how it is experienced.

The growing area of grief studies provided modest support for the traditional picture of mourning. Two prominent scholars in the field, Camille Wortman and

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<sup>8</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 45.

<sup>9</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 5.

Roxanne Silver, published a study in 1989 entitled *The Myths of Coping with Loss* argued that many of the core assumptions about bereavement were, in fact, wrong.<sup>11</sup> They argued that grief experts had assumed that it was essential to express one's pain after a loss. However, the idea had never been adequately tested.<sup>12</sup> Such unsubstantiated ideas became conventional wisdom and by the end of the 1990s it was assumed that an individual must explore and give voice to the depth of their grief or else it would fester impacting every emotional, psycho-social and remaining spiritual area of their lives.<sup>13</sup>

### The Stages

The theory that has proven to be the most widely held paradigm for the grief experience is found in what is referred to as the stages of grief. When a personal loss or public tragedy is experienced, the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) are mentioned throughout media. The stage theory of both dying and grief has become deeply embedded and embraced in contemporary culture. If the average person was asked how normal dying and/or grieving is supposed to go, most likely the response would refer to the "stages" of grief. Whether learned in Psychology 101 or in readily available grief resources, the stages of grief first penned by Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross has been the mainstay of grief theory since her work *On Death and Dying* was published in 1969.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Camille Wortman and Roxanne Silver, "The Myth of Coping with Loss," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 57, no. 3 (1989): 349.

<sup>12</sup> Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 46.



Despite the theory's widespread acceptance, research indicates there is no clear evidence of such stages among those who are grieving.<sup>15</sup> Researchers have determined that the concept of stages of grieving is an inaccurate, seriously limited and unhelpful theory.<sup>16</sup> In practice, Kubler-Ross' stages theory has been put forward by practitioners as prescriptive, rather than descriptive suggesting that stage or phases of grief is a universal human experience with no variance. The theory lacks an important element when it does not consider the important context of individual, familial, religious, societal, and cultural factors that impact one's experience of grief. The danger lies in presuming that a normal or healthy expression of grief is only expressed through one's experience of each stage. If an individual's grief experience does not follow the determined stages precisely (which it will most likely not) then a person risks being labeled unhealthy, avoidant, abnormal, or even pathological.<sup>17</sup> The fear of missing a stage or not grieving thoroughly becomes an added emotional weight for one who is already bearing a great deal.

Researchers at Yale University decided to test whether the stages reflect the experience of grief. Their findings served to confirm the inadequacy of the theory. One of their most significant findings was that in the stages model, acceptance is defined as acknowledging that your loved one is permanently gone as the last and final stage. But the resulting study, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, found that most respondents accepted the death of a loved one from the very beginning. Individuals did not have to journey towards acceptance of the death. The death served as

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Neimeyer, *Meaning and Reconstruction and Loss* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 3.

<sup>16</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 47.

the beginning point of the experience of grief and not the end.<sup>18</sup> Researchers interviewed 233 people between one to twenty-four months after the death of their spouses by natural causes to assess their grief indicators. Across all points on the timeline, acceptance of the death was the indicator most frequently checked off. Participants also reported feeling more yearning for their loved ones rather than either anger or depression, two of the primary cornerstone stages in the Kubler-Ross model.<sup>19</sup>

Even so, ever since Kubler-Ross introduced her five stages of death, dying and grief, the number of stage theories has grown substantially. Therese Rando, popular author and speaker on grief, proposed her version of stage theory with the six R's<sup>20</sup> while former priest-turned-counselor Robert E. Kavanaugh outlined seven phases.<sup>21</sup> Like Kubler-Ross' original five, these additional stages were based on anecdotes and personal experience, rather than systematic surveys and research.<sup>22</sup>

So why does stage theory remain so entrenched? Perhaps the enduring popularity of the theories actually tell us much more about broader psychological needs. It may reflect a desire to make sense of how the mind comes to accept events and circumstances that it cannot understand or express adequately.<sup>23</sup> Recognizing one's need to make sense or to gain control over that which feels senseless and out of control psychologist Janice Geneviro suggests that "the variety of stages of grief theory have become popular and

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<sup>18</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Konigsberg, 69. Rando's Six R's: 1. Recognize the death, 2. React (emotionally), 3. Recollect and Reexperience, 4. Relinquish 5. Readjust 6. Invest.

<sup>21</sup> Konigsberg, 69. Kavanaugh's stages: 1. Shock, 2. Disorganization, 3. Volatile, 4. Emotions, 5. Guilt, 6. Loss and Loneliness, 7. Relief and Reestablishment.

<sup>22</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 70.

<sup>23</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 11.

embedded in curricula, textbooks, popular entertainment and media because they offer predictability and a sense of manageability of the powerful emotions associated with bereavement and loss.”<sup>24</sup>

Psychologist Toni Bisconti further affirms the inadequacy of the stages when she suggested that researchers had looked at grief cross-sectionally and longitudinally, yet no one had actually measured it frequently enough to know how it unfolded in real time:

Grief is anything but linear, and my data showing consistent ups and downs are obviously in conflict with stage theory. Stage theories are also conducive to self-fulfilling prophecies and confirmation biases. In other words, if I lose my partner/spouse and I am angry on a given day, I’ll think I’m in the anger stage and discount the fact that also on that day I might be sad, distraught, even happy at a given moment.<sup>25</sup>

Stage theories work well for people who happen to experience emotions that are consistent with the stage paradigm, but the theories may prove to be detrimental to those who do not share the predictable experience. Emphasizing prescriptive aspects such as ‘normal’ grief and ‘stages’ of grief, the traditional grief field has actually promulgated a rather narrow and fixed understanding of grief. The result has been that such a narrow and fixed understanding has sometimes left grieving people feeling alone, misunderstood and even judged. Each person’s grief is fashioned out of innumerable and varied aspects of one’s life, such as one’s history of losses, one’s relationships, one’s ways of making meaning, one’s experience of God, one’s religious resources, one’s sense of community, one’s culture and so on.<sup>26</sup> It is hard to imagine that the many aspects that influence the experience of grief could be summed up in five, six or even seven stages.

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<sup>24</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 72.

<sup>26</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 49.

## Public Grief; Private Grief

The convergence of private and public voices have guided the expression of national grief surrounding the events of September 11, 2001. Along with the horror of 9/11 came the outpouring of grief expressions as streams of images from funerals and memorial services transformed private experiences into publicly shared ones. The loss of lives that day and in tragedies that have followed have shown a predictable, expected collective response: we were all attacked that sunny early fall morning and therefore, we all mourned.<sup>27</sup> Personal grief narratives melded with the public one as ordinary citizens gave a new voice to the experience of grief with the disclosure of personal experiences on the internet and social media.<sup>28</sup>

As grief is an important dynamic in any culture, a society as a whole will most likely be unable to face grief without some kind of script. One of the contemporary challenges of the public expression of grief is that the grief experience in western culture has changed and is no longer predictable. British sociologist Tony Walter offers, “no culture before has abandoned all recommendations as to how to mourn.”<sup>29</sup> The time has come to move beyond the current habit of using inadequate theories that create unnecessarily lengthy and agonizing models for loss resulting in more fear and anxiety surrounding the experience.<sup>30</sup> Walter goes on to say:

Contemporary bereavement is a matter of self-monitoring, assisted by advice from family and friends, bereavement books, counselors and mutual help groups. In this, bereavement is like contemporary marriage and child-rearing in which

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<sup>27</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 6

<sup>28</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 15.

<sup>29</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 197.

<sup>30</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 197.

partners and parents are always asking how well they are doing, consulting the baby books to see if their child's development is above or below average.<sup>31</sup>

If grief is going to be a matter of self-monitoring, then a more accurate understanding of grief should be expounded and expressed whenever possible in our culture. But what does that more accurate understanding of grief entail?

### Resilience

A recent and more encouraging perspective on how individuals grieve has been brought forward through the research of Dr. George Bonanno, Professor of Clinical Psychology at Columbia University. Bonanno's research indicates that many who lose a loved one are actually more resilient than expected.

Bonanno affirms that the most consistent finding in his research is that bereavement is not a one-dimensional experience. He suggests three common patterns of grief reactions across a period of time. Some people suffer from chronic grief reactions. The pain of loss simply overwhelms them, and they find it all but impossible to return to their normal daily routine. Others experience a more gradual recovery. They suffer intensely but then slowly pick up the pieces and put their lives back together.<sup>32</sup>

However, for most, the experience of grief is not overwhelming or unending. As frightening as the pain of loss can be, most will find themselves to be resilient. While experiencing shock or feeling wounded by a loss, many are still able to regain equilibrium and settle into a new reality and a new normal. That there are various levels of anguish and sadness during bereavement cannot be denied. Bonanno's research

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<sup>31</sup> Tony Walter, *On Bereavement*, (Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, 1999), 125.

<sup>32</sup> Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness*, 6.

suggests that reactions to grief are designed to create acceptance and accommodate losses relatively quickly in order to be able to return to a sense of emotional, spiritual and psycho-social stability. Resilience does not mean that a loss is fully resolved, once and for all. Even the most resilient individuals seem to hold onto a bit of longing and sadness but they remain able to keep living their lives and loving those that are still present.<sup>33</sup>

One of the most surprising results of Bonanno's studies found that recently bereaved individuals who did not express their negative emotions had fewer health problems and complaints than those who did. The finding suggests that holding the negative emotions in check or not expressing them in their fullness might serve a protective function. As has been previously stated, contemporary grief culture maintains that each grief experience is unique, but then attempts to offer a uniform set of instructions. While there are many factors that may make grief harder or challenging for some more than others (such as its suddenness or cause of death, or the age of and relationship to the person who died), probably the most accurate predictors of how someone will grieve are personality and temperament before the loss.<sup>34</sup>

Bonanno's findings also suggest that to be resilient in grief means to reach an acceptable adjustment to someone's death within a relatively short period of time.<sup>35</sup> By discovering that 45% of bereaved spouses showed no symptoms of grief (depression, yearning, despair, anxiety), six months after their spouses died, Bonanno defined resilience as the ability to remain relatively stable with healthy levels of psychological

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<sup>33</sup> Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 15.

<sup>35</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 155.

and physical functioning despite experiencing the extremely disruptive events such as the death of a spouse. Bonanno argued that “resilience to the unsettling effects of interpersonal loss is not rare but relatively common, does not appear to indicate pathology but rather healthy adjustment, and does not lead to delayed grief reactions” as had been described in previous long-standing theories of grief.<sup>36</sup>

In his most recent research, Bonanno confirms that the majority of people experience a shortened and limited time span for the worst of their grief than was previously understood. The most common pattern showed there to be no debilitating grief symptoms found six months after the death, with smaller groups recovering by eighteen months. An even smaller number took two to four years past the death to experience fewer and lessened symptoms and a sense of never quite returning to normal.<sup>37</sup>

Resilient grievers appear better equipped to accept death as a fact of life and tend to have a more positive worldview. Chronic grievers are less confident about their coping abilities and more dependent on the relationship to the deceased.<sup>38</sup> The loss to death of a loved one is forever, but acute grief is not and does not have to be, a distinction that frequently gets lost in most contemporary grief theory.<sup>39</sup>

As Bonanno wrote in his book *The Other Side of Sadness*, C. S. Lewis was on to something when he described grief as a ‘bomber circling round and dropping its bombs each time the circle brings it overhead.’<sup>40</sup> Bonanno added to that visual description, “it is

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<sup>36</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 155.

<sup>37</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 155.

<sup>38</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 54.

<sup>39</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 48.

<sup>40</sup> Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness*, 43.

that respite from the trench of sadness that makes grief bearable. It is the marvelous human capacity to squeeze in brief moments of happiness and joy that allows us to see that we may once again begin moving forward."<sup>41</sup>

The possibility that individuals are more resilient in grief than previously thought provides a path away from the previously entrenched ways of thinking about grief. Perhaps the knowledge that resilience and sense of survival is strong, and that many have endured terrible losses and thrived, can be a source of hope, something that has been hard to find in the contemporary grief culture.<sup>42</sup>

Instead of rushing to prescribe new ways to grieve, it would be more helpful to update what the research tells us: that most people are resilient enough to get through loss and reach an acceptable level of adjustment on their own. It is only a small percentage who will have a more difficult time of it. It is these individuals that professionals (clinicians, pastors, etc.) should focus their efforts on offering interventions and guidance that is unique and personal to the situation and circumstance and not based on expectations and myth.<sup>43</sup>

Resilience notwithstanding, there will be more to the experience of grief than simply getting over it and moving on. Grief is a powerful experience, even for the most resilient among us, and it sometimes dramatically shifts our perspective on life.<sup>44</sup> Therein lies the great opportunity for pastors and ministry leaders to guide individuals to that new perspective of their lives.

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<sup>41</sup> Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness*, 43.

<sup>42</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 197.

<sup>43</sup> Konigsberg, *The Truth About Grief*, 197.

<sup>44</sup> Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness*, 8.



## Attachment Theory and Meaning Making

As grief theory and research is understood by ministry leaders, pastors and other Christian practitioners, there are two theories that give a meaningful paradigm to understanding the experience of grief: attachment theory and meaning making. Our lives are lived in relationships. Each relationship plays a role in our lives, and the attachment and meaning we give to those relationships can give shape in ways both large and small as to how grief is experienced.

First formulated by British psychiatrist, John Bowlby, attachment theory has been and remains essential for many grief theorists and clinicians as it has much to say that is helpful in the care for the grieving. An international survey of 77 leading specialists in grief revealed that attachment theory was their preferred perspectives for understanding grief.<sup>45</sup> Attachment theory is considered to be a critical lens for considering pastoral response following loss.<sup>46</sup> Although it certainly cannot explain all the complex and nuanced dimensions of one's response to loss, Melissa Kelley, Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling, Boston College, suggests that attachment theory reveals the essence and heart of the grief experience.<sup>47</sup>

Attachment theory offers several important paths for understanding the impact of grief. Through the study of children and their caregivers, Bowlby proposed that attachment behaviors are instinctually done to foster physical proximity to the attachment

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<sup>45</sup> W. Middleton, A. Moylan, B. Raphael, P. Burnett and N. Matinkek, "An International Perspective on Bereavement Related Concepts," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 27, no. 3 (1993): 458.

<sup>46</sup> James C. Dean, "Grief and Attachment," *Journal of Religion and Health* 27, no. 2 (1988): 159.

<sup>47</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 51.

figure. When the attachment figure provides the appropriate response to the needs of the infant a secure sense of attachment is developed. These secure attachments that are formed in infancy provide a significant role in one's ability to form secure relationships later in life.<sup>48</sup> Bowlby maintained that attachment behavior is an instinctual dimension of being human and endures throughout one's life. One never outgrows or develops beyond attachment behavior, but instead it is persistent, as Bowlby says, "from the cradle to the grave."<sup>49</sup>

Through further study and collaboration, Bowlby suggested that security in attachment results from two things: first, it is grounded in a child's awareness of an attachment figure who is *available* and *accessible* and, second, in a child's appraisal of an attachment figure who is responsive to the child's needs. Bowlby defined caregiver responsiveness as the 'willingness to act as comforter and protector.'<sup>50</sup> Bowlby proposed that the term *availability* is inclusive of both the accessibility and the responsiveness of the caregiver and names the goal of the attachment.<sup>51</sup>

### Attachment to God

The implications for using attachment theory as a paradigm for providing pastoral care for those in grief should be easily understood. Despite decades of research and writing on human attachments, attachment theorists have paid little attention to the

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<sup>48</sup> John Bowlby and Colin Murray Parkes, "Separation and Loss in The Family," in *The Child and His Family*, ed. E. J. Anthony (New York: Wiley, 1970), 29.

<sup>49</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 55.

<sup>50</sup> John Bowlby, "Attachment and Loss," in *Separation, Vol.2* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 201.

<sup>51</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 56.

individual's attachments, or relationships with God. Attachment to God is still a largely unexplored frontier, although some researchers are beginning to see that attachment to God may be a highly significant and profound factor in one's experience of grief.<sup>52</sup>

Phillip Bennett, a pastoral psychotherapist, suggests that when God is seen as the ultimate secure base, individuals may more easily negotiate separation and loss:

Without God as our secure base, our love of others easily becomes distorted by our fear of loss: we cling to others for fear of losing them (which may, in fact drive them away, fulfilling our worst fear). Or we may try to avoid the pain of loss by avoiding intimacy altogether. The secure base of God's love will not take away our losses but it can help us discover an abiding Presence that sustains us even in the midst of things that are passing away. In letting ourselves be loved by God, we form an attachment to the only One who cannot leave us.<sup>53</sup>

Dr. Lee Kirkpatrick, Professor of Psychology at College of William & Mary, is at the forefront of exploring the theory of attachment to God. Kirkpatrick suggests that attachment theory is an important, although not completely exhaustive or comprehensive, psychological framework for understanding religious experience because a personal relationship with God is at the core of monotheistic religions, especially Christianity.<sup>54</sup> More simply stated, if God is personal then one's attachment to God will be a personal one.

As a colleague of Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth had determined five criteria that distinguish attachment relationships from other relationships. The relationship between an infant and a caregiver constitutes an attachment if the infant 1) seeks proximity to the caregiver 2) turns to the caregiver as a haven of safety at times of distress 3) uses the caregiver as a secure base from which to explore the environment 4) experiences anxiety

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<sup>52</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 52.

<sup>53</sup> Phillip Bennett, *Let Yourself Be Loved* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1997), 31.

<sup>54</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 60.

when we separate from the caregiver is threatened and 5) experiences grief when the caregiver is lost. Kirkpatrick maintains that these same five criteria are satisfied when one considers religious beliefs and behaviors.<sup>55</sup>

Kirkpatrick proposes that many religious beliefs and behaviors reflect features of actual attachment processes that are intended to achieve proximity to God such as prayer. Kirkpatrick offers ways that religious beliefs portray God as the ultimate secure base, Ainsworth's third criterion for attachment relationships. In the Judeo-Christian faith, God is portrayed as omnipresent and omniscient, qualities that would offer ultimate security. Hebrew and Christian Scriptures contain descriptions of God as a secure base:

For you are my rock and my fortress; and for your name's sake  
you lead me and guide me. (Ps 31:3)

Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings! (Ps 61:4)

But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother;  
like a weaned child is my soul within me. (Ps 131:2)

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil; for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff they comfort me. (Ps 23:4)

The scriptures reveal that God is not just a secure base but is actively engaged in being available and responding to the needs of those with whom he has a relationship.

### Meaning Making after Loss

Along with attachment theory, "meaning making" captures an essential feature of the contemporary grief field. Frequently found in contemporary grief theory discussion

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<sup>55</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 60.

is the need to affirm and/or reconstruct meaning after loss. Some will go so far as to suggest that meaning making is “the central process” in the experience of grief.<sup>56</sup>

The experience of death and grief give rise to the largest, most difficult questions of life: who am I? Why was I born what is the purpose or goal of my life? Why does the world work the way it does? Why is there so much suffering? Is there a God? What if there is no God? Is there any *meaning* to all of this?

The answers that are offered to such questions are expressions of how deep sense is made of things, the way the world is understood, how to articulate purpose or goals of our lives, the significance we seek in living and the core values by which we order our lives. Important to note for this discussion is that meaning making embraces and explores personal theological questions such as how to understand God’s activity in the world, God’s feelings about and response to us, and God’s role in suffering.<sup>57</sup> Being able to articulate meaning, including theological meaning, creates order, sense and purpose out of experiences and events that could otherwise seem random, or chaotic.

Grief researcher, Robert Neimeyer, Professor of Psychology at the University of Memphis, affirms that the challenge to one’s meaning system goes right to the heart of the grief experience: “grieving individuals can be viewed as struggling to affirm or reconstruct a personal world of meaning that has been challenged by loss.”<sup>58</sup> According to this perspective, the central process of grieving is integrating the loss into one’s story and sorting out what it all means.

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<sup>56</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 71.

<sup>57</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 75.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Neimeyer & Nancy Keesee. “Dimensions of Diversity in the Reconstruction of Meaning,” in *Living with Grief: Who We Are, How We Grieve*, eds. Ken Doka and Joyce Davidson, (Philadelphia, PA: Brunner/Mazel, 1998), 225.

Neimeyer describes the desire for meaning-making in grief in narrative terms. Such meaning is found when one considers their grief story in such a way that it may provide sense, coherence, and continuity within their larger personal story. Neimeyer further pounds the theory by offering “like a novel that loses a central character in the middle chapters, the life story disrupted by loss must be reorganized, rewritten to find a new strand of continuity that bridges the past with the future in an intelligible fashion.”<sup>59</sup> The task of reconstructing meaning of one’s story after loss is what is primary and essential to understand one’s present and future life experiences.

### Meaning Making in Theological Perspective

Neimeyer’s theory of meaning making leads to the question as to why some people experience profound narrative disruptions and threatened meaning after loss while others enjoy some essential continuity in both story and meaning system? Why are some resilient in the experience of grief and others are not? Why do some people affirm or reconstruct meaning after loss while others find themselves suffering a deep sense of meaninglessness? These questions are ultimately theological ones, therefore, the answers will be theological as well. When the questions and the answers are explored and pursued fully they will reveal one’s concept of God.<sup>60</sup>

Kelley suggests that while meaning making after loss may be central to the contemporary secular grief field, it is, in fact, an important theological endeavor in the

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<sup>59</sup> Robert Neimeyer, “The Language of Loss: Grief Therapy as Process of Meaning Reconstruction,” in *Meaning Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 263.

<sup>60</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 86.

experience of grief in three important ways. First, everyone has a story and concept of God that shapes each person's story in profound ways. William Willimon has written, "A great trauma makes theologians of us all."<sup>61</sup> The experience of loss may be so painful that it forces one to grapple with one's understandings of the world in order to make sense of it. Such understandings are ultimately theological in nature:

How we make sense of loss flows from and depends on how we conceive of God, God's activity in the world, and ourselves before God, Is there a God? What if there is no God? Is God to blame for one's loss and sufferings? Does God cause or allow suffering to punish or teach lessons? Does God prevent suffering if one only prays hard enough? Is God powerless in the face of suffering? Is God moved deeply by suffering? Does God suffer with those who suffer? Does God care faithfully throughout one's suffering?<sup>62</sup>

Such questions suggest the possibility of different concepts of God. Different understandings of God will shape very different stories and meaning systems.

Secondly, different concepts of God lead to different meanings and theologically speaking, all meanings are not created equal. One's concept of God may largely shape whether one's grief experience is hopeful with meaning (resilient) or desperately meaningless. Is God distant and removed from the details of one's life or is he nearby and intimately connected with the circumstances surrounding one's experience of loss and grief? One's answer to the question will guide the construction of meaning given to the loss and the grief that follows.

The final and third aspect is that different concepts of God lead to different meanings, including the meaning that is made of mystery. Mystery is not a concept that

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<sup>61</sup> William W. Willimon, "What September 11 Taught Me About Preaching" in *In the Aftermath: What September 11 Is Teaching Us About Our World, Our Faith and Ourselves*, ed. James Taylor (Kelowna, BC: Northstone, 2002), 104.

<sup>62</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 87.

is easily embraced in western culture where the greater value is placed on finding answers and explanations for difficult experiences. However, mystery is a constant character in the drama of grief and loss.<sup>63</sup> Sometimes in the face of mystery, people experience meaninglessness. Their meaning system, including their God concept, does not help them to embrace or accept the mystery of life, making their suffering even worse.

In contrast, the Christian faith suggests that life, while full of mystery is never meaningless. In fact, there is great meaning to be found in mystery. The Christian story is steeped in the mystery of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection. And the heart of this mystery is love: God's fierce and faithful love for each person, manifest for all time in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. While life can seem scary and senseless in times of loss, its deepest meaning issues from a faithful God whose ways cannot be fully known but who is love (1 John 4:8, 16). This steadfast and unending love provides ultimate sense and meaning in the face of mystery. The Christian is freed from the need to seek meaning in human terms and instead surrender to what is perhaps the greatest paradox of the Christian life: there is suffering *and* God is love; there is pain, *and* God is love; there is loss, *and* God is love; there is mystery, *and* God is love. The promise is not that there will be no suffering, but rather that nothing will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:39).<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 88.

<sup>64</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 89.



## Meaning Making and Attachment to God

The author proposes that the way that one's story and meaning system are connected to one's attachment to God will guide the personal experience of grief. Such meaning making and attachment to God will likely lead to a sense of resilience in the face of grief. When one knows and experiences a secure attachment to the God who through his incarnation shared in suffering and pain, one may have a fundamental sense of trust, security and safety beyond their immediate circumstance. When loss enters and impacts one's life, a secure and well-known story and meaning system may fundamentally hold firm. With God as a secure base one may better tolerate the unfairness, randomness, and mystery of life, loss and death.

While one grieves deeply for those who have died, it does not mean that one will be plunged into despair. Such an attachment to God means one is tethered in a way that cannot be broken to a loving God who cherishes, holds us and protects us from the threat of meaninglessness. Without such security in attachment to God, one's story may be fundamentally rocked by loss, leading to a narrative free fall. Apart from an attachment to God, the search and struggle for new meaning will be found but most likely in inadequate and temporary ways.<sup>65</sup>

## The Soul Work of Grief

Grief theories will only be relevant when they adequately reflect and guide one's personal experience of grief. The personal stories of grief deserve great care by pastors and ministry leaders. Writing in *God's Fierce Whimsy*, Mary Pellauer says:

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<sup>65</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 89.

I have a very deep sense that there is nothing more beautiful than listening to people tell their stories about faith and God. They express, as nothing else can, who we really are, and what we really believe in, and the meaning in our lives...If there's anything worth calling theology, it is listening to people's stories - listening to them and honoring and cherishing them.<sup>66</sup>

People who have experienced great loss have experienced a disruptive turn in their story. Such loss also provides the opportunity for transformation as one's story is shaped with new meaning in order to live with hope into the future. When the response to the griever comes out of the Christian story, then God's abiding love will become the foundational theme of their storyline. God was with the person in all aspects of the terrible loss. God is with them now as they experience the depth of their grief. God will be with them as they move into a hopeful future that will flow out of their attachment to the God who has never abandoned them.

The remainder of this project will report on the responses of a small group (9) of men and women who share the belief that God is present with them and for them in their suffering and loss as they explored their experience of grief in a focus group that transpired in June and July, 2016. In listening to their stories, observing the commonalities and differences, bearing witness to their struggle of finding meaning in the mystery, the theory of resilience, meaning making and attachment to God became a tangible reality.

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<sup>66</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 90.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, “Fear not, I am the one who helps you.”

—Isaiah 41.13

#### **Introduction**

An essential aspect of this thesis project is that the experience of grief surrounding the death of a loved one is a universal experience. At the same time, it is also an experience that is frequently misunderstood. No matter the cultural context or faith belief (or lack thereof), few are willing or able to explore the experience of grief with all of its emotional, psycho-social and spiritual pain in a way that acknowledges and addresses its significant impact. The result is that the griever is left with the inability to integrate such a life-changing experience into the whole of their lives. Denying the impact of the experience of grief means that the opportunity that exists for spiritual formation and a deepening experience of God’s presence are dismissed.

Those who live by faith in Jesus Christ are not exempt from the difficulty in understanding the ways that the experience of grief shapes who we are. Too frequently, Christians believe that because of their faith, the time, energy and focus they give to grief in their lives should be of short duration and easily navigated. If we believe that God is the Loving Lord of our lives and works all things together for good, then surely we can say that we can trust Him to bring good into our lives in the midst of our pain. The problem becomes that God’s redeeming purposes and intentions in the experience of grief are most often ignored because the path of grief is hardly a clear one.

The argument of this project is that God uses and redeems the experience of grief to reveal who He is and to spiritually form us in the image of His Son. The principal question that guided the design and implementation of the thesis-project was whether the tools of scripture, spiritual readings and disciplines would effectively guide an individual in their personal soul work of grief leading to a deepening experience of God's presence and a sense of spiritual formation taking place.

### Assumptions

The thesis-project was designed to explore the possibility that spiritual formation can take place when one faces the crisis of grief. The belief that God's presence may become more clear and steady and faith deepen while facing grief guided the development of the project. The awareness that the crisis of grief can also be a moment when faith in God disintegrates, when darkness descends and one may give up on believing in anything and trusting anyone was also important to the project's development.

The project was developed with several important questions that arise for the Christian who is experiencing grief:

- How do we explain the difference between people who turn from God and people who turn to God during their grief?
- Why is it that some grieving people who previously appeared strong in their faith become detached and embittered?
- Why do others easily seek others for help and encouragement, never doubting God's presence, continue praying and worshipping, and embrace their lives in a

way that is infused with new meaning?

- How is grief to be understood in such a way that the goal is never “to get over” the loss of the loved one but to accept the reality of it and somehow consecrate that loss?

### Project Methodology

Such questions guided the creation of a small cohort of women and men who have experienced the death of a loved one. The thesis-project intended to provide the opportunity for spiritual formation that is possible in the experience of grief. The research tools used were initial conversations to explore participation, a five-week focus group and surveys for evaluation. Devotional material for the five group meetings for “The Soul Work of Grief” was developed with a threefold emphasis: to educate regarding the experience of grief; to understand and experience the ways that God meets us in our journey of grief and to explore a variety of spiritual disciplines that can guide one in their grief.

The desired outcome for the project was for each participant to become aware of perceived growth or challenges in their understanding and experience of God in the context of their grief. Due to the nature of the topic, the majority of the data collected was qualitative. The project consisted of one cohort that met for five consecutive weeks, June 29 through August 3, 2016. The participants submitted pre-project and post-project surveys with open-ended questions and weekly response sheets connected to each week of material to observe the participant’s awareness and spiritual growth as they engaged with the material.

## Procedures and Materials

The nature of the thesis project determined that the use of a focus group would be the most effective means for engaging with the material and for collecting qualitative data. Participation in a group with others who share similar experiences allowed for individuals to reflect, question and support others who could relate and understand their experience. The response to a written invitation followed by one-on-one conversations with potential participants found the final group to be willing and eager to engage in a project that would have both a personal focus as well as aid the future development of grief ministry in the church.

Informed consent was obtained from each participant that assured their names and responses would be held in confidence. The consent provided the parameters of the study and obtained their permission to use the data collected to complete the project. (Informed Consent document can be found in Appendix B). Each participant completed a pre-survey to provide the researcher with an understanding of each person's awareness of their experience of grief. (Pre-Project Survey can be found in Appendix C). A post-project survey was completed by each person at the end of the focus group to provide more self-reflection for the individual and data for the researcher as to the effectiveness of the material. (Post-Project Survey can be found in Appendix D.)

## Research Participants

An invitation to participation in the focus group was extended to twenty different individuals who attend Stanwich Church and recognize it as their faith community. Each individual was known to have experienced the loss by death of a significant person in

their life be it a family member or friend. An invitation letter was sent to each prospective participant explaining the project and asking them to be a part of the focus group. (Letter found in Appendix A).

The final group consisted of eight women and two men. That difference in gender is not unusual as previous grief support work reflected a similar difference in response by gender. While the group was not familiar with every participant, the two common factors that each held was their high level of commitment to their life of faith and Stanwich Church as well as their familiarity with the researcher who had served as their pastor following their loss.

While previous grief support work that I have done focused on one particular loss (Adult Loss of Parent, Widow/Widower) this group had seven different types of relationship among the participations. An important dynamic for me to explore as the researcher was the effectiveness of mixing the types of relationship losses. The initial surprise in the group was the number of those grieving the death of a sibling. The death of a sibling is often viewed by the public as a minimal loss or one that is not on the same level of grief as the death of a spouse or a child.

While the focus group participants were previously known to each other by varying degrees, the responses from each individual were reported in such a way to maintain their anonymity. Each was assigned a number that was consistently used on their pre- and post-project survey responses in addition to the responses reported on the weekly response sheet. The list that follows indicates the assigned number and the personal information of the participants including the cause of death, relational

connection to person who died, length of time since the death and length of membership at Stanwich Church:

Figure A: Research Participants

#	Cause of death	Person	Time since death	Church Member
P1	Suicide	Friend	Two months	Two years
P2	Suicide	Brother	Three months	Two years
P3	Sudden	Sister	Seven years	Sixteen years
P4	Cancer	Brother	Six months	Six years
P5	Sudden Illness	Husband	Six years	Eighteen years
P6	Sudden Illness	Mother	Two years	Eleven years
P7	Accident	Adult Son	Eight months	Eighteen years
P8	Cancer	Father	Two years	Five years
P9	Suicide	Brother	Six years	Five years
P10	Cancer	Brother	Forty-four yrs	Five years

The cause of the deaths being grieved varied included three who had experienced death by suicide. Such a loss has unique aspects and is distinctly different from deaths resulting from illness or natural death. However, it was anticipated that what would be learned through the focus group and the development of materials would allow for the creation of ministry to respond directly to this unique loss.

The length of time since the death of the loved to seek support was consistent with the usual time frame for those who are in grief. The first year after a death is when those who are grieving are more willing and intentional about seeking support and



guidance. However, the fact that 3 participants of the group had experienced the death more than five years ago confirmed that the grief experience is one that never completely ends but rather reveals new aspects to the grief.

### Focus Group Weekly Material

Each participant was provided with a three-ring binder containing the material for each of the five weeks of the focus group. Designed as a daily devotional, the material provided participants with tools in four areas:

- Education on a specific aspect of the grief experience as found in “The Experience of Grief” chart.
- Biblical and theological understanding of grief.
- Spiritual readings that would offer insight and reflection as seen through the grief experience of others.
- Suggested spiritual discipline that could guide the individual to explore how God is present to them in their experience of grief.

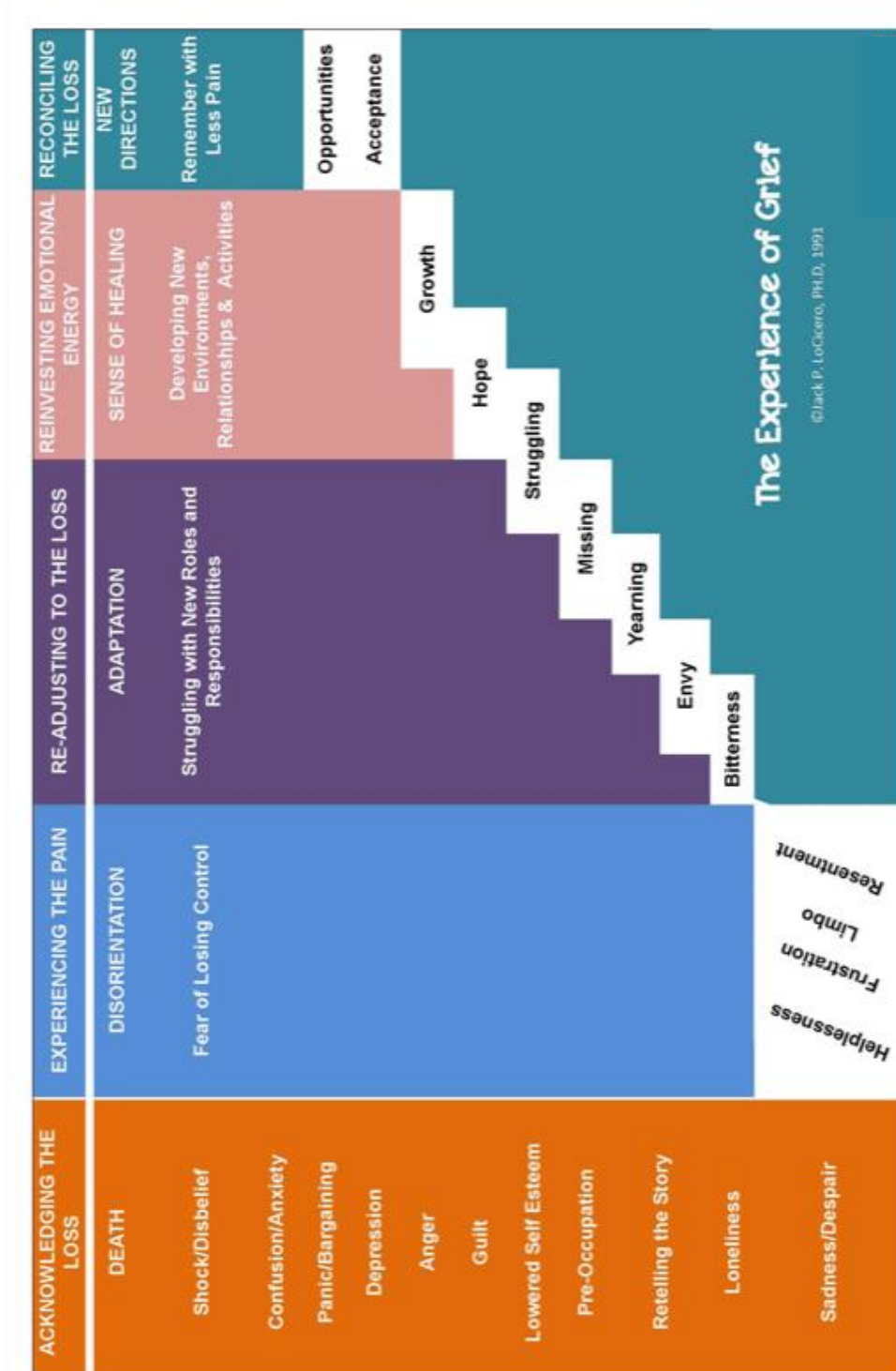
Weekly response sheets were included to encourage participants to reflect whether the material had been helpful or if it had offered no perceivable benefit. The structure of the weekly ninety minute group was as follows: introduction to a particular aspect of grief, group interaction with the scriptures and spiritual readings that were chosen and introduction to a spiritual discipline that could be used to engage with aspects of the experience of grief. (The focus group material for The Soul Work of Grief can be found in Appendix E.)

## The Experience of Grief Chart

The “Experience of Grief” chart created by Dr. Jack LoCicero (1991) provided the framework for educating and guiding participants in their understanding of grief. The researcher has used the chart as a tool in grief education for sixteen years and has found it to provide an accessible understanding of not only what the individual may be experiencing in their grief in that moment but as to what may be anticipated in the future. The five experiences of the chart guided the focus of the devotional material each week. (See Experience of Grief Chart Figure B on following page.)

The “Experience of Grief” chart explores the five aspects to the experience of grief: acknowledging the loss, experiencing the pain, re-adjusting to the loss, re-investing emotional energy and finally recognizing the loss. Not to be viewed as “stages” to move through in a determinative time frame, the “Experience of Grief” chart provides a paradigm for the multi-faceted and cyclical experience that reflects more accurately the common and universal experience of grief. The chart can be found as part of the focus group material found in Appendix F.

Figure B. The Experience of Grief



*Source:* The Experience of Grief Chart was developed by hospice and bereavement counselor and educator Dr. Jack LoCicero in 1991. It is a visual tool for educators, counselors, and others working with those who have experienced a death or other significant loss. Researcher was introduced to the chart in 1999 in class taught by Dr. LoCicero, “Dimensions of Grief” in the Master’s of Hospice and Palliative Care, Madonna University, Livonia, Michigan.

## **Survey Instruments**

Three instruments were used to obtain qualitative data and to evaluate the impact of the material and the experience of the focus group on each individual.

### **Pre-Project Survey**

The initial instrument used by each focus group participant was the pre-project survey. The survey was forwarded to each participant when researched was notified of their participation in the focus group. The completed surveys were returned to the researched at the first meeting of the focus group on June 29, 2016. The survey was designed to collect demographic information as well as provide each individual the opportunity to reflect on the way their experience of grief had impacted their faith and relationship with God as they understood it at that time. Each individual was assigned a number so that the results from the initial survey could be compared to the results of the post-project survey. The demographic information included gender, age, church affiliation and length of time they had been a Christian. In addition, the survey contained short - answer term questions:

- What was your relationship to the person who died?
- How long has it been since the person died?
- What resources or tools (support groups, books, counseling) have you used to address your grief during this time?

Seven questions addressed the impact of grief on the individual's spiritual life as they currently understood it:

- How would you describe your spiritual life today?

- In what ways has this death and its grief impacted your life and your spiritual journey?
- What questions of faith have you found surfacing during this time?
- How has your grief diminished or deepened your faith?
- Do you believe your faith has shaped your experience of grief?
- Have you been disappointed in how you have experienced your faith during this time?
- Has faith been an asset (or not) as you have experienced your grief?

The benefit of the survey was that it provided a baseline for each individual and researcher to observe the impact of grief and thereby provide guidance and direction in the development of the focus group material. The limitation of the survey was its subjectivity in providing a limited evaluation of the individual's experience. The researcher trusted the accuracy of the individual's self-evaluation.

### Weekly Response Sheet

The second assessment used was the weekly response sheet that participants used as part of their experience of the material. The same open-ended questions for response were used for each of the five weeks. Brief responses were submitted as participants completed the material each week. The responses reflected the aspect of grief that was addressed each week. The request for responses was intended to guide the individual as they assessed their own experience over the five-week period. Participants provided the completed response sheets from the previous week to the researcher at the beginning of the focus group meeting. The final response sheet was submitted to the researcher within

two weeks after the completion of the group. The response sheets included the following questions:

- How would you describe your overall experience of the group?
- How did you experience God this week?
- How did you notice God's presence with you?
- Why did you enjoy or not enjoy the material this week?
- What was the best thing about using the material?
- Did you have any difficulties?

(A sample weekly response sheet can be found within the focus group material in Appendix E.)

### Post-project Survey

The third assessment tool used was a post-project survey that was designed for participants to reflect on whether they were impacted by participating in the focus group and the use of the weekly material. Participants were asked to complete the survey within two weeks of the completion of the group so that the responses would be more accurate in reflecting their memory of the experience of all aspects of the focus group. The first questions were asked to determine the individual's level of participation. The second set of open-ended questions were designed to address the participants' self-awareness of the impact on grief in their spiritual journey:

- How has your understanding and experience of grief changed in the last six weeks?

- In what ways can you identify that grief has impacted your life and your spiritual journey?
- What questions of faith did you explore during this time?
- Were any of those questions answered in a way that was satisfying?
- In what ways have you experienced God's presence during this time?
- In what ways did you hope to experience God through your participation in this group?

The remaining questions addressed whether participation in the focus group and use of the material had benefited them in their experience of God and their spiritual formation:

- What spiritual readings (if any) were the most beneficial to you?
- What scriptures (if any) were the most beneficial to you?
- What spiritual discipline(s) (if any) did you find the most beneficial to you?
- Which (if any) of the spiritual disciplines will continue to use in your spiritual life?

(Post-project Survey can be found in Appendix D.)

### **Expected Outcomes**

It is a difficult task to objectively recognize whether one has been able to use an experience of grief to recognize God's presence and sense of movement in personal spiritual formation. Whether such formation takes shape in the soul of the griever will have to be recognized by the individual themselves. Believing that God uses and redeems the experience of grief to reveal who He is and to spiritually form us in the image of His Son to be an anticipated outcome may prove to be a source of hope and

encouragement when the difficult and harshness of grief is explored. Through faith, something as painful as grief may be seen as an invitation by God to live life more deeply and experience the love of God more intensely.



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS**

I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.

—Psalm 27. 13-14

#### **Introduction**

This thesis-project has sought to understand how God uses and redeems the experience of grief to reveal who He is and to spiritually form those grieving in the image of His Son. The tools of scripture, spiritual readings and disciplines were used to guide participants in a five week focus group in their personal soul work of grief with the hope of deepening their experience of God's presence with a sense of spiritual formation taking place.

The ancient problem of God's presence and purpose in grief and suffering within the contemporary context was addressed in chapter one. The biblical and theological foundation for understanding God's presence in grief were observed in chapter two. A review of contemporary grief research and pertinent theories for effective pastoral care and ministry to those who are grieving was explored in chapter three. Chapter four presented the methodology of the research design that was used with a short term focus group of participants who have experienced the death of a loved one.

In this final chapter, I will present the observations and outcomes from the analysis of the qualitative research from the responses recorded in the three instruments used by the focus group. The pre-project, post-project survey results and weekly response sheets will be examined to note if the material offered in the focus group encouraged a deepening self-awareness and experience of God's presence in the

experience of grief. Finally, I will offer recommendations for effective grief ministry within local churches.

### **Summary Pre-project Survey Results**

The ten participants in the focus group submitted completed a pre-project survey before the focus group began. The initial questions regarding demographic information presented in Chapter Four (Figure A). The remaining questions were designed for the participant to reflect on their experience of grief as they understood it and its impact on their spiritual life. The Pre-project Survey can be found in Appendix C. A sampling of the responses for each questions from the participants as found in Figure A follows:

*Pre-Project Q4: How would you describe your spiritual life today?*

- P3: Good - except when I find myself experiencing grief.
- P7: I'm active with church activities but I know that sometimes I hide what is really going on with me there.

*Pre-Project Q5: In what ways has this death and its grief impacted your life and your spiritual journey?*

- P6: I was angry and lost.
- P9: My insecurities and feeling of abandonment were front and center for a full two years after his death.

*Pre-Project Q6: What questions of faith have you found surfacing during this time?*

- P2: Why didn't God intervene?
- P6: How could something like this happen to such an amazing woman of God?

*Pre-Project Q7: How has your grief diminished or deepened your faith?*

- P8: Initial grief strengthened my faith but as time goes on and my heart forgets the depths of despair I went through.
- P4: My faith has waived.

*Pre-Project Q8: Do you believe your faith has shaped your experience of grief?*

- P5: Yes...absolutely.
- P6: Without my faith I think it would be very easy to find myself mired in my grief with no way to move forward.

*Pre-Project Q9: Have you been disappointed in how you have experienced your faith during this time?*

- P9: It's as if the soul forgets how much pain and suffering it went through and how much work it has gone through to become "healthy" again after such a traumatic time.
- P1: I am less disciplined in spiritual practices than I would like to be. Not sure if that has been related to my grief.

*Pre-Project Question 10: Has faith been an asset (or not) as you experienced your grief?*

- P 7: Definitely. I don't know how anyone goes through such a loss without having the Lord and a church community.
- P9: As hard as it was, I kept asking God to shine a light on every aspect of my heart and help me face the most undesirable and shameful places in my heart, the parts that had deep soul wounds that were in desperate need of healing.

### **Summary Weekly Response Sheet Results**

An important aspect to the five week focus grief was the weekly response sheets that were submitted to the researcher each week. The purpose of the response sheets was to guide and encourage self-awareness, reflection and engagement with the material that was presented each week in the focus group. The questions remained consistent for each week. A sampling of the responses that addressed the theme for the week follow:<sup>1</sup>

**Week 1: Acknowledging the Loss:** The first experience of grief to be addressed was “acknowledging the loss”. The topic addressed the emotional understanding of the reality of the loss.

*W1Q1: How would you describe your overall experience of the group?*

- P8: Positive though initially I did experience resistance to participating and delving back into grief.

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<sup>1</sup> All responses from the five weekly response sheets are found in Appendix E and were submitted from July 13 - August 24, 2016.

- P5: Discussing grief is an incredible way to connect with people if they are willing to go to those deep and hurting parts of their soul.

*W1Q2: How did you experience God?*

- P7: I had to call upon God in silent prayer for courage and strength to listen to others share their grief and experience my own.
- P5: I experienced God when I heard everyone's stories of loss...such a comfort.

*W1Q3: How did you notice God's presence with you?*

- P3: He gave me peace of mind and the openness of heart to participate and gain from the experience.
- P1: I slept well for the first time in weeks.

*W1Q4: Why did you enjoy or not enjoy the material this week?*

- P1: I enjoyed the scriptures - they were brief so it was easier for me to use the new discipline of lectio divina.
- P4: Loved the grief chart.

*W1Q5: What was the best thing about the material?*

- P7: I liked having the structure to guide me.
- P9: The new technique (lectio divina) was a new way to approach scripture for me.

*W1Q6: Did you have any difficulties?*

- P6: Yes...concentrating and being still.
- P5: Meditation. I'm always doing something so to sit and be still is hard.

**Week 2: Experiencing the Pain:** After the initial experience of grief, the individual may experience intense emotions, thoughts, feelings and even a physical reaction to their grief. It can be disconcerting to find such intense emotions beyond the early days of grief.

*W2Q1: How would you describe your overall experience of the group?*

- P8: Difficult. Tonight was hard, emotionally taxing, but ultimately comforting.
- P5: Intense as people were open and courageous about sharing their grief.

*W2Q2: How did you experience God?*

- P2: Listening to how others experienced God in their most difficult moments helped me see where God was/is in these moments.
- P3: I feel that God is working at a deep level to heal what was broken when my sister died.

*W2Q3: How did you notice God's presence with you?*

- P2: The emotions followed me through the week, especially after the devastating losses in France (truck rampage in Nice).

- P9: I found God explaining the process of grief and why it's necessary, but the 'why' question does keep popping up.

*W2Q4: Why did you enjoy or not enjoy the material this week?*

- P4: The spiritual readings especially resonated with me.
- P8: I am looking forward to making Examen a part of my routine.

*W2Q5: What was the best thing about using the material?*

- P8: Examen - I also loved the spiritual readings!
- P7: Jeremiah 18.1-6: God continues to mold us through all our hardships.

*W2Q6: Did you have any difficulties?*

- P3: Time is always short and too often and easily filled with other things!
- P4: Apathy/resistance.

**Week 3: Re-Adjusting to the Loss:** This is the time of struggling with new roles and responsibilities. The task is to adapt to the new environment. There may still be strong feelings of missing the individual and yearning to have them back.

*W3Q1: How would you describe your overall experience of the group?*

- P6: I feel privileged to be trusted with something as intimate as people's personal experience of grief.
- P10: Everyone's grief walk is different, but the shared experience is an

incredible way to connect with someone.

*W3Q2: How did you experience God?*

- P2: Through the hope that I see in people's eyes as they walk in faith through their grief.
- P9: In grieving, I tried to experience every emotion as it comes on. I didn't try to suppress it or run from it.

*W3Q3: How did you notice God's presence with you?*

- P5: I feel more good memories coming and less sadness/loneliness.
- P9: I asked him to string lights on every nook and cranny to give me the courage to face what would be revealed.

*W3Q4: Why did you enjoy or not enjoy the material this week?*

- P3: It zeroes in on how I've been feeling about prayer or lack thereof.
- P5: I am really enjoying all the new scripture verses and seeing how they address my grief.

*W3Q5: What was the best thing about using the material?*

- P1: Stopping - focusing on God and his love this week.



- P8: Ezekiel 36:26: I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh - as a result of the grief and soul work.

*W3Q6: Did you have any difficulties?*

- P6: Yes...staying quiet and trying to feel a sense of the presence of God.
- P7: Finding time! Also, the verses were a little more obscure this week and didn't really strike a chord with me.

**Week 4: Re-Investing Emotional Energy:** New roles and responsibilities eventually become less painful and more satisfying. Having survived such a great crisis, they now see the light at the end of the tunnel. There is a need to reinvest emotional energy into new tasks, relationships, hobbies and other things that begin to help define the new a new life.

*W4Q1: How would you describe your overall experience of the group?*

- P5: I enjoy and am comforted by everyone's openness.
- P7: Good to be with people I know or have an affection with.

*W4Q2: How did you experience God?*

- P7: Peacefully...given all the loss of our experience.
- P10: Through each person's reflection on the readings from last week.

*W4Q3: How did you notice God's presence with you?*

- P1: Continued to receive affirmation of God's love and care for me through the words of scripture and the readings.
- P7: Calm and peaceful.

*W4Q4: Why did you enjoy or not enjoy the material this week?*

- P2: Each week I have enjoyed going through the scripture and spiritual reading.
- P9: I loved the Tim Keller quote about rubbing hope into grief. Rubbing salt into a wound is painful but rubbing hope into the wound of grief makes the pain bearable.

*W4Q5: What was the best thing about using the material?*

- P5: Knowing that grief can be so all consuming.
- P8: My prayer is for J., K., and K., whose grief is still new.

*W4Q6: Did you have any difficulties?*

- No written responses.

**Week 5: Reconciling the Loss:** As one begins to take their life in new directions, there is an opportunity to focus energy on making decisions on the future and the quality of life. They transform their relationship with the deceased from one of

physical to one of memory. They understand that grief is not the process of forgetting, but of remembering with less pain.

*W5Q1: How would you describe your overall experience of the group?*

- P8: Group came alongside each other and loved one another through some of their hardest times.
- P10: Grief is individual - there isn't a wrong way to grieve.

*W5Q2: How did you experience God?*

- P7: Recognizing his love for me in my brokenness from grief.
- P9: Through the 'opportunity' of being part of this group.

*W5Q3: How did you notice God's presence with you?*

- P3: Stillness.
- P7: Peace and...a little joy (few moments).

*W5Q4: Why did you enjoy or not enjoy the material this week?*

- P6: Sharing memories, helped bring all the loved ones lost to life for those of us who had never met them.
- P9: Sabbath practices!! Good suggestions.

*W5Q5: What was the best thing about using the material?*

- P1: Allowing yourself the freedom to feel any which way.
- P9: Grief is not the process of forgetting, but of remembering with less pain.

*W6Q6: Did you have any difficulties?*

- P5: Being intentional about keeping the sabbath and creating space in a busy schedule.
- P7: We fill our lives with so many things that really don't matter.

### **Summary Post-Project Survey Results**

Each participant completed the post-project survey within two weeks of the completion of the focus group (Group completed on August 3, 2016. Post-Project survey submitted to researcher by August 17, 2016). The purpose of the survey was for participants to be able to identify and recognize growth towards a deepening experience of God's presence in their lives. The Post-Project Survey can be found in Appendix D. A sampling of the responses for each questions follows:

*PostQ1: How has your understanding and experience of grief changed in the last six weeks?*

- P2: We all have a story.
- P3: Being with a community of believers who share their grief experience has helped me tremendously to know how much God is taking care of all of us.

*PostQ2: In what ways can you identify that grief has impacted your life and your spiritual journey?*

- P2: It's made me address those deep dark corners of my soul that I kept trying to ignore and strengthened my faith along the way as God had intention for me to prosper and not harm me.
- P6: Finally admitted the depth of my pain and grief.

*PostQ3: What questions of faith did you explore during this time?*

- P4: Is God present in my grief?
- P5: Why doesn't God intervene?

*PostQ4: Were any of those questions answered in a way that was satisfying?*

- P9: Yes - to shape us to be more like more like him.
- P5: God does not remove himself from our pain and suffering but can be found in it.

*PostQ5: In what ways have you experienced God's presence during this time?*

- P2: God doesn't seem callous, distant and removed from me and my grief.
- P4: God has come close, or rather, I have drawn close to him in a new and different way.
- P3: Peace - not reasoning or trying to figure the reason behind the death.

*PostQ6: In what ways did you hope to experience God through your participation in this group?*

- P6: Re-experiencing some of the grief emotion has allowed me to feel closer to God.

- P1: I wasn't expecting God in the group initially. But now I would say that experiencing God's presence in the group was so important.

*PostQ7: What spiritual readings (if any) were the most beneficial to you?*

- P2: Spiritual reads have helped me grow tremendously as an individual. I'll likely read several of the books the quotes were taken from.
- P5: Most of the quotes were important to me. When I would hear someone else talk about one of the quotes it would cause me to reflect on each in a new and different way.
- As a group, multiple quotes were listed from the focus group material.

*PostQ8: What scriptures (if any) were the most beneficial to you?*

- The group identified the ways the scriptures that were part of the material each week related to the topic. Through conversations, participants indicated how the ways that familiar scriptures became real and understood in new ways.

*PostQ9: What spiritual discipline(s) (if any) did you find the most beneficial to you?*

- P2: Lectio divina was a new way of reading scripture for me.
- P4: Examen prayer calmed me each time I used it.
- P7: The discipline of self-care made me aware of how much I have not taken care of myself. It gave me permission to do that.

*PostQ10: What, if any, of the spiritual disciplines will continue to use in your spiritual life?*

- P2: Lectio divina will be used during my devotional time.
- P4: Examen prayer.
- P6: Practicing the Presence of God is something that will guide me not only  
when I am experiencing grief, but in the moments of joy that creep back in.
- P7: Practicing the Presence; Lectio Divina definitely
- P9: All of them

### **Summary of Instrument Results**

The three instruments used by the focus group participants (pre- and post-survey and weekly responses) together tell the story of personal journeys that each made during a vulnerable, challenging and sensitive time in their lives. The recorded responses reflect the willingness of each to be honest, to question and to be guided to understand their grief and the possible ways that God could use the experience to reveal himself to them in new and deeper ways.

The initial survey responses were consistent with what the researcher has found previously through hundreds of conversations with those who are grieving.<sup>2</sup> The experience of grief lends itself to questions regarding God together with pain and suffering even among those who do not profess an active faith. Exploring grief through the context of faith provided a foundation in which to think about the experience of grief that explored God's presence or sense of his absence. The responses indicated an awareness that the despair and heartache of grief cannot be masked or hidden. A sense of

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<sup>2</sup> Researcher served as Director of Grief Support at Arbor Hospice in Ann Arbor, Michigan from 2000 - 2005. By writing curriculum for specific loss support groups, leading a wide variety of support groups and creating and directing a family grief camp (Camp BraveHeart), hundreds of conversations took place with those who have experienced the death of a loved one.

heaviness in trying to push through the weight of grief gave a clear picture of the challenge shared by each participant. Knowing the extensive involvement in the life and ministry surrounding Stanwich Church by the group participants, it was noticeable the lack of initial thoughtful theological reflection or biblical references relating to the experience of grief in response to the questions. In addition, there was no indication of receiving direct support and care from the pastoral staff or faith community of Stanwich even though it was known that such care had been provided to each individual.

When the flow of the recorded responses to the material for each of the five focus group meetings is observed it is clear that each participant connected with both the depth of their grief and God's desire and intention to meet them in their pain and struggle. For several, it opened up a new level of grief response that had not been explored before. Others were able to give words to what their experience of grief had been in the past and how their faith had grown and deepened.

Participants indicated that the explanation for each aspect of grief as suggested in the Experience of Grief chart was beneficial in helping them to understand their previous and present experience of grief. Others indicated that the chart also guided them in understanding what they could anticipate in the future as they continued to experience grief. The weekly material that was designed in a daily devotional format served to allow familiar scriptures to resonate in a new way when used to address a specific aspect of the experience of grief. The spiritual readings that were chosen to be included each week served to expand the understanding of faith by hearing others voice their experience thereby guiding each one on their personal journey of grief. The spiritual discipline of lectio divina provided the tool for exploring the suggested scriptures and connecting with



them in ways that impacted their grief. The prayer of examen was embraced as a tool to use not only during the weeks of the focus group but the desire was repeatedly expressed to continue to use it as it guided participants into a new level of prayer and reflection. Being introduced to the discipline of “Practicing the Presence” brought the hope that God being with them in their grief was not merely a theory but an impactful reality.

A significant aspect of the weekly responses was the impact meeting together as a group had on the willingness and ability to engage in such a difficult experience. Even though all the participants attended Stanwich Church, the individuals were not well known to each other. A short-term intentional community evolved whose focus was to journey together through a difficult experience. The context of Stanwich Church being the worshipping community for each brought a level of understanding and familiarity to be able to trust one another. One striking word that repeatedly surfaced to describe the group experience was that it was a “safe” place to be honest in their questions and in their pain.

The post-survey instrument responses indicate that participants did not experience their grief as coming to an end or being resolved but rather they had received tools to continue to individually explore aspects of their grief as needed. The responses also reflect a trust in being able to be honest about their questions and challenges in their experience of grief as they know that a deepened relationship with God is possible. That God redeems and brings about new life was not only confirmed but began to be experienced. A group that began with a thoughts and impressions of God’s distant involvement with them in the midst of their grief concluded with a sense of shared hope of knowing God in a deeper and transforming way.

## **Conclusions**

As stated earlier in this project, people's personal stories deserve great care. Pastors and ministry leaders are in the unique position of being able to listen, understand and guide those whose stories have taken a harsh, if not tragic, turn. Those who are grieving need particular care and understanding that they most likely will not receive from others. Entering into the story of griever provides an opportunity like no other to be guided to the Incarnate God. Those who have entered the experience of grief deserve great care by pastors and ministry leaders. Churches, pastors and ministry leaders can create the opportunity for such care in the following ways:

Pastors and ministry leaders need to be equipped in the unique demands, expectations and experiences of those who are grieving. Seminary training is limited in what it does to equip future pastors to be able to minister effectively to those who are grieving. It does not take long for a pastor to realize how much of pastoral care is directed towards those who are grieving. One does not need to have experienced the same particular grief or loss to be able to be present with one in their loss. There remains an underlying belief that the Christian faith provides some sort of guarantee to be relieved of pain and suffering, or at the very least, that it will be experienced in minimal ways. Such a false belief will only be addressed when one experiences disappointment, pain and suffering. The words and guidance offered to individuals and families who are grieving can impact current and future generations. Pastors should avail themselves of resources that are readily available to understand the mind and soul of one who is grieving. Recommended resources for pastors/ministry leaders can be found in Appendix H.

Churches can equip and prepare its congregants for future grief before it is experienced. It is certainly one thing to have a working knowledge of who God may be in the midst of grief and another to fully experience his presence when grief is encountered. Churches can create the opportunity to equip their congregants through sermons, grief workshops and other teaching avenues designed to prepare people for death, dying and grief. Such offerings provide a context for experiencing death and grief when it does occur. While a church may be hesitant to use sermon or teaching times for concern that such a topic will not receive a strong response, Stanwich Church experienced the opposite when a four week preaching series was offered in February, 2015. The response indicated to the staff that the questions regarding death and grief were of great concern to the congregation. (Outline of sermon series and manuscript for sermon entitled “The Soul Work of Grief” can be found in Appendix G.)

Churches may also use seasons of the year where there is an awareness of grief and loss that takes place in parallel with times that are viewed as filled with celebration and great joy. A Service of Remembrance and Hope can be offered during the weeks of Advent for those who have experienced the death of a loved one during the year. Mother’s Day and Father’s Day are times to address the grief that comes from the death of a parent while at the same time celebrating parents who are living among us. No matter what form the church takes in our contemporary context, highly liturgical or infused with jazz worship, the need to care for the souls of those who are grieving remains a constant. There is no other place in our culture where one should be able to go and be welcomed in seasons of great joy and seasons of great sorrow and grief.

## **Personal Reflections**

The experience of the course of study in the Doctor of Ministry program and this particular choice of the thesis-project, “The Soul Work of Grief” has been both a satisfying and a deeply personal experience. There is a deep sense that joining with those who are on the difficult journey of grief is God’s call and invitation to me and I have a renewed commitment to it. In my current ministry, I will continue to provide those who are facing the experience of grief a path that can guide them to a deepened relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit who desire to be present and spiritually transform them as they grieve. Grief ministry will continue to provide personal growth for me as a pastor as I become even more aware of how God is present with us in our grief. While this aspect of pastoral care will remain an essential aspect of my ministry at Stanwich Church, I look forward to moving to a new opportunity that will allow grief support and care to be my primary ministry.

As I come to the end of this project, it would be easy to rest on current knowledge that might be seen in the multiple shelves in my office filled with grief books. A greater understanding of God’s intentions for the experience of grief in our lives and exploring current grief theories have been an important points of growth for me through this project. Even with those considerations, it was a recent experience and conversation that was important for me to recognize what God desires most in offering care to those who are grieving.

I recently spent a week with a small group of men and women on retreat. With no prior knowledge of the participants, it was an opportunity to come to know others who are seeking God more deeply in their lives in the ways that matter. Kim was someone

that I could tell had a story that I wanted to know. As we began to talk, I quickly recognized why that was true. In our conversation, she made a defining statement: thirteen years ago her two teenage children were in a car wreck that killed her nineteen year old son. She went on to say that she felt that upon hearing the news, her soul was torn apart. In that moment, I realized that books may provide insight and theories may offer helpful ways to think about grief, but when standing with someone whose sorrow has been unbearable, there is only one thing that you really bring to that moment: your quiet presence.

The wondrous news of the gospel message is that when our world has crashed, when we cannot see the next step in front of us; when darkness is mixed into our lives, God meets us. Through the Incarnation, we know that God's first intention is not to do away with the darkness but to be present with us in it. The promises God gives us can bring us new life: I will give you the treasure of darkness that you may know that it is I the Lord, who calls you by name (Isa 45:3). God's promise is that the darkness does not last for the people who have walked in darkness for they have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness, on them has light shone (Isa 9:2).

May we shine the light of God's presence through our own willingness to be a quiet presence for those who need to see through the darkness to a new day.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

## APPENDIX A

### INVITATION LETTER

June 1, 2016

Dear (Invited Participant),

As you may know, I am currently a candidate for the Doctor of Ministry degree from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. For the last four years, my track of study in the program has been "Spiritual Formation for Ministry Leaders". I can define that more easily by saying that the course of study has focus has been on God shapes and stirs our souls to become more like His Son Jesus. The last requirement for the degree is the completion of the doctoral thesis-project.

Because of past ministry experience and personal passion, my study has focused on what I call the "soul work of grief". I know that my faith - and hopefully my soul! - has both expanded and deepened as I have come to understand more fully how God meets us in our grief and uses it to shape us in ways we could never imagine.

As part of my thesis, I have developed material that I would hope to use with Christian men and women who are grieving the death of someone they have loved - spouse, sibling, parent or friend. The material has a three fold emphasis: to educate on the experience of grief; to understand and experience the ways that God meets us in our journey of grief and to explore a variety of spiritual disciplines that can guide us in our grief.

I would like to invite you to be a part of a focus group of eight to ten men and women from Stanwich Church who have experienced who would meet together to explore this resource together. I believe that you would find value in the material and in connecting with others who have experienced significant grief. I will also value your input regarding the material so that I can know what needs to be added or taken away to be able to be an effective resource for others in the future.

The group will meet for five consecutive weeks beginning Wednesday, June 29 with the final gathering on July 27th. The group will meet from 7 - 8:30 pm at our home, Charis House. Each week you will receive material for the coming week that will include suggested scripture readings, brief spiritual readings, suggested spiritual discipline and a focus on one aspect of the experience of grief. Please let me know of your willingness and availability and what further questions you have.

I am so grateful for your consideration,  
Jacky Gatliff

**APPENDIX B**  
**INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT**

Project Title: **The Soul Work of Grief**  
Principal Investigator: **Jacquelin A. E. Gatliff, Doctor of Ministry Program,  
Gordon- Conwell Theological Seminary**

**PURPOSE**

This is a research study. The purpose of this research study how and if the experience of grief shapes us in our spiritual formation as we explore how God uses grief to reveal who He is and to shape us in the image of His Son. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. You may ask any questions about the research, what you will be asked to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear.

You are invited to participate in this research study because you have experienced grief from the death of a loved one.

**PROCEDURES**

If you agree to participate, your involvement will last for five weeks beginning with the first week of the focus group gathering.

The following procedures are involved in the focus group: The Soul Work of Grief

1. Each participant will be sent a binder of materials to be used over the course of the six weeks.
2. Each participant will complete the initial survey form.
3. Each participant will be asked to commit to five weekly small group gatherings consisting of five others who have also experienced grief from the death of a loved one.
4. Each participant will be asked to use the designated material for each week for their devotional time.
5. Each participant will be asked to complete a guided journal entry of their experience and response to the material provided each week.
6. Each participant will complete a final survey and return the surveys and response pages to the researcher. Material will be provided to the researched within one week of the final gathering. A stamped return envelope will be provided, if necessary.

## **RISKS**

There is no anticipated risk to the participants. However, it is noted that reflecting and engaging with the experience of grief brings an intensity of experience. Participants will experience their grief within a supportive small group along with individual attention by the researcher/leader.

## **BENEFITS**

The potential personal benefits that may occur as a result of your participation in this study are an understanding of your personal experience of grief the possible ways that tools of spiritual formation (scripture, readings, spiritual disciplines) may guide you to an awareness of how God may be present to you in your grief.

## **COMPENSATION**

You will not be compensated for participating in this research project.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Records of participation in this research project will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. Survey forms and response pages will not be associated to the researched with any name. Confidentiality will be maintained through coded numbers on both survey form and response pages. All materials returned to the researched will be kept in a file cabinet to which only the researcher has access. Such material will be destroyed (shredded) when the information has been summarized. In the event of any report or publication from this study, your identity will not be disclosed. Results will be reported in a summarized manner in such a way that you cannot be identified.

## **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Taking part in this research study is voluntary. If you agree to participate in this study, you may stop participating at any time. Any data collected prior to withdrawal will be destroyed and will not be used in the study results.

## **QUESTIONS**

Questions are encouraged. If you have any questions about this research project, please contact: Jacky Gatliff at (203) 832-0267 or [jacky@stanwichchurch.org](mailto:jacky@stanwichchurch.org). If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Co-Chair of the Institutional Review Board, David A. Currie, at: [dcurrie@gordonconwell.edu](mailto:dcurrie@gordonconwell.edu); 978-646-4176

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.



Participant's Name (printed):

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(Signature of Participant)

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(Date)

**RESEARCHER STATEMENT**

I have discussed the above points with the participant. It is my opinion that the participant understands the risks, benefits, and procedures involved with participation in this research study.

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(Signature of Researcher)

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(Date)

## APPENDIX C

### PRE-PROJECT SURVEY<sup>3</sup>

Participant's No. \_\_\_\_\_

#### Pre-project Survey

**To be completed at the beginning of the six week focus group:  
The Soul Work of Grief**

This questionnaire is designed to explore how you have experienced your grief from the death of one that you love and the effectiveness of tools that you have used during this time. The information you provide will be helpful for future development and use of materials that may help others grow in their experience of grief. This study is being done by Jacky Gatliff, student in the Doctor of Ministry program at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Please be assured that all of your answers will be kept strictly confidential. The information that you provide will be presented only in summary form, in combination with the responses of other participants in this study. The number at the top of the page will only be used to link the pre- and post- project survey forms. The answers that you give will never be linked with your name.

#### Personal Information

1. 2 Male 8 Female

2. What is your age?:

       18-25 yrs 2 26-40 yrs 4 41-60 yrs 4 over 60

3. How long have you been a Christian?

0 Less than 2 yrs 1 2-9 yrs 4 10 - 20 yrs 5 More than 20 yrs

4. What would you consider to be your primary church background/denomination?

- Lutheran/Congregational
- Stanwich - raised Roman Catholic
- Pentecostal/Church of God(youth) Independent (20 years)
- Grew up Roman Catholic. Congregational
- Presbyterian and Congregational
- Episcopalian - grew up in the church

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<sup>3</sup> Pre-Project Surveys were submitted on June 29, 2016.

## Experience of Grief

Please answer all questions based on your current experience of grief.

### 1. What was your relationship to the person who died?

- brother (4)
- sister died suddenly in her sleep
- close friend
- husband
- she was my mother
- father
- adult son

### 2. How long has it been since the person died?

- 2 months - 3 years: 6
- More than 5 years: 4

### 3. What resources or tools have you used to address your grief during this time?

- Books:

*Boundaries, Changes that Heal*

*Safe People* - Cloud & Townsend

*Experiencing Father's Embrace* - Frost

*How to Have Difficult Conversations You've Been Avoiding* - Cloud & Townsend

*She's Got Issues; Brave Enough* - Nicole Unice

Suicide Books:

*Silent Grief* - Lukas & Seidan

*Touched By A Suicide* - Myers & Fine

*Understanding Your Suicide Grief* - Wolfelt

*No Time to Say Goodbye* - Fine

*Dying To Be Free* - Cobain/Larch

Columns on Suicide from Online Blogs and News

- Support Groups/Counseling

*Grief Share* Support Group at Harvest Time (local church)

Center for Hope & Renewal - Individual Therapy (local counseling center)

- Other:

All my church relationships.

Prayer, discussion, wrote observations/thoughts on brother.

Just powered through, focusing on caring for my mother, brother-in-law, and their three children.

Friends that I talk with.

Books, prayer, love and support from step-daughters, friends.

## **Spiritual Life:**

### **4. How would you describe your spiritual life today?**

- P2: highly dependent on Jesus a daily walk and search for Christ. Dependency on Him in all areas of my life.
- P3: Good - except when I find myself experiencing grief
- P4: healthy and growing
- P5: active and fulfilling
- P6: It needs work. My faith is often the last thing to be addressed unless I make an intentional effort with a bible study
- P7: I'm active with church activities but I know that sometimes I hide what is really going on with me there.
- P8: I consider myself a believer in Jesus as my Lord and Savior. My faith is paramount in my life.
- P9: Very Strong - intentional searching

### **5. In what ways has this death and its grief impacted your life and your spiritual journey?**

- P1: At first it was a road block. I was angry. Now I feel like it has pushed me further in my faith.
- P2: It put life in perspective at the end of the day, all we have are relationships.
- P3: need to turn to the Lord regularly to overcome pain and loneliness.
- P5: My husband's death has been devastating at times, but I have felt the Lord's presence in tangible ways. I have found that I am able to do things on my own that I would rely on my husband to take care of.
- P6: made it stronger.
- P8: trust that God's plan is always at work even when I don't understand it. Pressing into that.
- P9: Brian's suicide put most of my family's issues, my insecurities and the feeling of abandonment front and center for a full 2 years after his death. It was a daily and very intentional effort to work through family struggle to develop healthy relationships and mend broken ones, release others that were unhealthy and let myself fully feel the loss of my 2nd biggest fan. My faith and many Christian books were my guide.
- P10: Moved me forward into a deeper, closer more personal relationship with the Lord.

### **6. What questions of faith have you found surfacing during this time?**

- P1: Why wasn't this prevented - when it had been prevented before?
- P1: Why does God let someone suffer to the extent of taking their own life?
- P2: Why doesn't God intervene? Ex. Suicidal pilot in Europe, mass shootings, individual suicide.
- P2: Where do people who took their life go?

P3: Is my sister with Jesus?  
 P4: Why do good things happen to bad people and vice versa?  
 P5: Whether or not I will see my husband when I die?  
 P6: How could something like this happen to such an amazing woman of God?  
 P6: Why bad things happen to good people and why does God allow this?  
 P9: Would God really punish them for that act?  
 P9: How would I feel about my faith if I believed that to be true?  
 P9: Why did God create on Earth rather than birthing us all directly into heaven?  
 P10: Why God would let this happen?

### **7. How has your grief diminished or deepened your faith?**

P2: Deepened my faith as I believe that I will have the joy of seeing my brother again someday.  
 P3: At first it was a roadblock, but now I see my faith as what has really gotten me through it.  
 P4: Deepened by leaning on God when I don't have the answers.  
 P5: The grief has definitely deepened by faith. I spend more time in reading the Bible and praying. I never really had a quiet time before he died - although he did every day.  
 P6: Definitely deepened my faith with the evidence of God's provision and presence through dark times.  
 P8: Initial grief strengthened my faith, as time goes on and my heart forgets the depths of despair I went through, my faith has waivered.  
 P10: Deepened. Experienced some unexplainable coincidences.

### **8. Do you believe your faith has shaped your experience of grief?**

P1: Yes!  
 P2: Absolutely  
 P3: It has helped me work through it.  
 P4: Not at all!  
 P5: Yes...absolutely.  
 P6: Without my faith I think it would be very easy to find myself mired in my grief with no way to move forward.  
 P7: Definitely – it has sustained me, and the Lord's promise of eternal life is the hope I hold onto.  
 P8: Yes, reached out to Jesus, repeatedly.  
 P9: Yes and reshaped my faith. Made me look at what I believe.  
 P10: Led me in to seeking who God is.

### **9. Have you been disappointed in how you have experienced your faith during this time?**

P1: I am less disciplined in spiritual practices than I would like to be. Not sure if that is related to grief.

P2: Not at all!

P5: No. My only disappointment is that he died suddenly and we weren't able to spend more years together. There have only been one or two times when I found myself angry with God.

P7: No.

P8: No, faith got me through.

P9: The further I get from my brother's suicide the less in touch I feel with "life beyond the grave. It's as if the soul forgets how much pain and suffering it went through and how much work it has to become 'healthy' again after such a traumatic experience.

P10: No

**10. Has faith been an asset (or not) as you have experienced your grief?**

P1: An asset, for sure.

P2: Absolutely. I feel it is the only thing that can truly help during such a tragic time.

P3: My faith community, corporate worship and trusted friends who walked the journey with me have all been assets.

P5: My faith has carried me through. I know that God is close to the broken hearted...I am overwhelmed with sorrow/joy (mixed) when I meditate on those words.

P6: An asset. I can't imagine handling it without the reassurance of heaven/God's still in control.

P7: Definitely. I don't know how anyone goes through such a loss without having the word and a church community to sustain him or her

P8: Yes, it would be unbearable without faith.

P9: Absolutely, some days it's the only thing that kept me going. As hard as it was, I kept asking God to shine a light on every aspect of my heart and help me face the most undesirable and shameful places in my heart, the parts that had deep soul wound that were in desperate need of healing...and to give me courage to work through everything. I kept giving myself reading assignment to get new perspective, further understanding and put a lot of work into healing my soul.

## POST-PROJECT SURVEY<sup>1</sup>

**Post-Project Survey**  
to be completed at the end of the five week focus group:  
**The Soul Work of Grief**

## Participant Information

Did you complete and submit the response sheets for each week of the study?  
 \_\_\_\_ Yes 10 No If not, how many? 6 participants completed 4  
4 participants completed 3

Please answer all questions based on your current experience of grief and your spiritual life.

P2: We all have a story, we need to let down our guards and allow those around us in. It's something we will all experience. Grief is a universal language we can all speak.

126

- P3: Being with a community of believers who share their grief experiences beautifully has helped me tremendously to know how much God is taking care of all of us.
- P5: That's okay to laugh, cry and discuss. That it does not have to be solemn and sad.
- P6: That I don't have to get over it or move on. I can look at my grief in a different way.
- P8: There is no exact way to grieve.
- P9: My grief is my grief.

## **2. In what ways can you identify that grief has impacted your life and your spiritual journey?**

- P2: Grief has given me more understanding and more patience for other people's life circumstances and more willing to help. It's made me address those deep dark corners of my soul that I kept trying to ignore, and strengthened my faith along the way as God had intention for me to prosper and not to harm me.
- P3: I have become completely surrendered and yielded as much as I know how to the God who has never stopped seeking my heart. Now he has it!
- P4: I have embraced my grief as an important part of my spiritual journey.
- P6: Finally admitted the depth of my pain and grief.
- P9: In many ways I thank my brother for my healthier life that he pushed me to seek out through his suicide.

## **3. What questions of faith did you explore during this time**

- P1: Why?
- P2: Does God really have a plan to prosper me and not harm to bring me hope and a future as I seek him with all my heart?
- P3: Is my sister with Jesus?
- P4: Is God present in my grief?
- P5: Why doesn't God intervene?
- P7: Do people who die of suicide go to heaven?
- P9: Why wasn't this prevented?
- P10: Why do good things happen to bad people and vice versa?

## **4. Were any of those questions answered in a way that was satisfying?**

- P3: Yes...seeking him with my mind, body, soul with my soul and my heart...has shown me he is very present.
- P5: God does not remove himself from our pain and suffering but can be found in it.



P7: God redeems my grief.

P9: To shape us more like him. But why can't we be born right into heaven?

**5. In what ways have you experienced God's presence during this time?**

P1: Tim Keller-- "to be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is over greatest fear. But to be fully known and loved is, well, a lot like being, loved by God. It is what we need more than any thing. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us."

P2: God doesn't seem callous, distant and removed from me and my grief.

P3: Peace - not reasoning or trying to figure the reason behind the death.

P4: God has come close, or rather, I have drawn close to him in a new and different way.

P6: Peace - trusting that there is a reason and purpose for her death and my grief.

P7: Peace and strength that surpasses all understanding.

P9: My fear and anger towards God softened as I knew he was with me.

**6. In what ways did you experience God through your participation in this group?**

P1: I wasn't expecting God in the group initially. But now I would say that experiencing God's presence in the group was so important.

P2: He wants me to be strong and courageous as I lean into him.

P3: To allow God to have another look at my heart and grow deeper in faith.

P6: Re-experiencing some of the grief emotions has allowed me to feel closer to God.

P7: The way I have experienced God...he will never forsake me.

P8: God is present to us through each other.

P10: Where two or more are gathered, God is there with his grace and mercy.

**Over the course of the five weeks:**

**7. What spiritual readings (if any) were the most beneficial to you?**

P2: Spiritual reads have helped me grow tremendously as an individual. I'll likely read several of the books the quotes were taken from.

P5: Most of the quotes were important to me. When I would hear someone else talk about one of the quotes it would cause me to reflect on each in a new and different way.

*\* Each member of the group indicated in the weekly meetings that the readings were important for them to see how others process and reflect on their grief.*

**8. What scriptures (if any) were the most beneficial to you?**

The group identified the ways the scriptures that were part of the material each week related to the topic. Through conversations, participants indicated how the ways that familiar scriptures became real and understood in new ways.

**9. What spiritual discipline(s) (if any) did you find the most beneficial to you?**

P2: Lectio divina was a new way of reading scripture for me.

P3: Examen was a new way for me to slow down and to try to begin to pray again.

P4: Examen prayer calmed me each time I used it.

P5: Practicing the Presence made me realize that he is there and nearby.

P6: Lectio Divina showed me how to read scripture for my heart.

P7: The discipline of self-care made me aware of how much I have not taken care of myself. It gave me permission to do that.

P8: I really liked the idea that self-care can be a spiritual discipline - helps me take away guilt when I do things that I think will be good for me.

**10. What, if any, of the spiritual disciplines will continue to use in your spiritual life?**

P2: Lectio divina will be used during my devotional time.

P4: Examen prayer.

P6: Practicing the Presence of God is something that will guide me not only when I am experiencing grief, but in the moments of joy that creep back in.

P7: Practicing the Presence; Lectio Divina definitely

P9: All of them

**APPENDIX E**  
**THE SOUL WORK OF GRIEF**  
**FOCUS GROUP MATERIAL**



Leader: Jacky Gatliff  
Location: Charis House, Stanwich Church  
Dates: June 29, July 13, July 20, July 27, August 3, 2016

Focus Group for partial completion of  
Doctor of Ministry  
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

June 29, 2016

Dear Friends,

I want you to know how grateful I am for your willingness to participate in the focus group, “The Soul Work of Grief” as partial requirement for the Doctor of Ministry degree at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. My hope and prayer is that these weeks will be ones that provide you the time and space to *explore your grief and the ways that God meets us and works in our lives as we grieve the death of someone we have loved.*

In the last sentence, I have clearly shown what I believe to be true about who God is in our lives during such times of both tenderness and upheaval. *I hope that as you participate in the group, explore the devotional material and reflect on your shared conversations and personal experience, that you will find that your faith and confidence in His care for you will grow wide and deep.* That is not to say that we will act as though God’s goodness is to be found “somewhere over the rainbow”. Rather, *I hope that you will be able to be honest about moments, and even seasons, when your faith in God feels as though it has disintegrated and darkness seems to have descended.*

In my role as the researcher, the project will look at several important questions that I believe arise for the believer who is experiencing grief: how do we explain the difference between people who turn from God and people who turn to God during their grief? Why is it that some grieving people who previously appeared strong in their faith become detached and embittered? Why do others easily seek help and encouragement, never doubting God’s presence, continue praying and worshiping, and embrace their lives in a way that is infused with new meaning? How is grief to be understood in such a way that the goal is never “to get over” the loss of the loved one but to accept the reality of it and somehow consecrate that loss? How is grief to be understood in such a way that the goal is never “to get over” the loss of the loved one but to accept the reality of it and somehow consecrate that loss?

As we begin these weeks together, I want to state the theological and biblical principles that I trust will guide as found in the words of Paul: “*We do not grieve as others do who have no hope*” (I Thess 4:13). With those words, Christians are given

permission to grieve. In Christ we have a hope, but that hope does not dismiss or negate the grief. Rather, the hope that we have in Christ is what aides us in putting grief in its place. When Paul writes, “*O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?*” (I Cor 15:55), he is acknowledging that death must be felt and acknowledged or the grief will remain. Because of the cross and resurrection, death has no victory. *The theological challenge is always to keep both the cross, with all its suffering and pain, held in light of the resurrection and the hope that it objectively and experientially provides.*

Our times together will certainly not be a “light” way to spend summer nights, but *I hope that they will be times that will allow you to experience and know richly God’s goodness in your life - today, tomorrow and for all eternity.*

Gratefully,

Jacky

## **WEEKLY SCHEDULE**

### **Week 1, June 29:**

Spiritual Discipline: Lectio Divinia

Grief Chart Description: Acknowledging the Loss

### **Week 2, July 13:**

Spiritual Discipline: Examen

Grief Chart Description: Experiencing the Pain

### **Week 3, July 20:**

Spiritual Discipline: Practicing the Presence

Experience of Grief: Re-Adjusting to the Loss

### **Week 4, July 27:**

Spiritual Discipline: Self-Care

Experience of Grief: Reinvesting Emotional Energy

### **Week 5, August 3:**

Spiritual Discipline: Worship and Sabbath

Experience of Grief: Reconciling the Loss

## **Week One: The Experience of Grief Acknowledging the Loss**

***The Invitation:*** Out of the deep have I called to the Lord, Lord, hear my voice.  
The Lord is full of compassion and mercy: Let me come and adore Him.  
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in  
the beginning, is now, and will be so forever. Amen.

***Petition:*** Be merciful to me O God, be merciful to me; for in you my soul takes refuge;  
in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, till the storms of destruction  
pass by. I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me.  
He will send from heaven and save me...God will send out his steadfast love  
and his faithfulness. (Ps 57:1-3)

***The Word:*** John 11:17-33

Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this? She said to him, 'Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.'

When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and he is calling for you." And when she had heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with her in the house consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.

The Word of the Lord.

### *Daily Scripture Readings*

**Sunday:** Ps 121; Deut 31:6  
**Monday:** Ps 31: 9-10  
**Tuesday:** Ps 23  
**Wednesday:** Ps 13:2; 5-6  
**Thursday:** Job 12:22; Deut 29:29  
**Friday:** 1 Thess 4:13  
**Saturday:** Ps 34:18

**Reflection:** Silent (prayer) and Written (journaling)

**God's Promise:** I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though he die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this? (John 11:25-26)

### *Spiritual Readings:*

**One bold message in the book of Job is that you can say anything to God. Throw at him your grief, your anger, your doubt, your bitterness, your betrayal, your disappointments - he can absorb them all. As often as not, spiritual giants of the Bible are shown contending with God. They prefer to go away limping, like Jacob, rather than to shut God out.**

- Philip Yancey, *Disappointment With God*

**You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you.**

- C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

**When there is no occasion to soar and no place to run, and all you can do is trudge along step by step, to hear of a Help that will enable you "to walk and not faint" is good news indeed.**

- John Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Traveler*

**In moments of anguish, the issue is more than our pain; it is our God...The knowledge of suffering's place in the scheme of things is God's to possess. That's why it is absolutely necessary that we know what kind of God we have.**

- Randy Bectyon, *Does God Care When We Suffer*

**A changed life will always involve pain; it always involves waiting; it always comes with the temptation to seek the easy way out.**

- Verdell Davis, *Let Me Grieve But Not Forever*



**To suffer is one thing, to suffer without meaning is another, but to suffer and choose not to press for any meaning is worst of all.**

- Os Guinness, *God in the Dark*.

**Sorrow reveals unknown depths in the soul...sorrow, with despair taken out of it, is the chosen power to reveal ourselves to ourselves. Hence it is sorrow that makes us think deeply, long, and soberly. Sorrow makes us go slower and more considerately, and introspect our motives and dispositions. It is sorrow that opens up within us the capacities of the heavenly life, and it is sorrow that makes us willing to launch our capacities on a boundless sea of service for God and for our fellows. God never uses anybody to a large degree, until after He breaks that one all to pieces.**

- Mrs. Charles E. Cowman, *Streams in the Desert*.

**The quickest way for anyone to reach the sun and the light of day is not to run west, chasing after the setting sun, but to head east, plunging into the darkness until one comes to the sunrise.**

- Gerald Sittser, *Author of A Grace Disguised*

***Song: I Will Lift My Eyes by Bebo Norman***

***God, my God, I cry out: Your beloved needs You now  
God, be near; calm my fear... And take my doubt  
Your kindness is what pulls me up; Your love is all that draws me in***

***I will lift my eyes to the Maker  
Of the mountains I can't climb  
I will lift my eyes to the Calmer  
Of the oceans raging wild  
I will lift my eyes to the Healer  
Of the hurt I hold inside  
I will lift my eyes, lift my eyes to You***

***God, my God, let mercy sing; Her melody over me  
And God, right here all I bring; Is all of me  
Your kindness is what pulls me up; Your love is all that draws me in***

***I will lift my eyes to the Maker  
Of the mountains I can't climb  
I will lift my eyes to the Calmer  
Of the oceans raging wild  
I will lift my eyes to the Healer  
Of the hurt I hold inside  
I will lift my eyes, lift my eyes to You***

***'Cause You are and You were and You will be forever; The Lover I need to save me  
'Cause You fashioned the earth and You hold it together, God..So hold me now***

***I will lift my eyes to the Maker  
Of the mountains I can't climb  
I will lift my eyes to the Calmer  
Of the oceans raging wild  
I will lift my eyes to the Healer  
Of the hurt I hold inside***

***I will lift my eyes, lift my eyes to You; I will lift my eyes, lift my eyes to You  
God, my God, I cry out: Your beloved needs You now...***

***Spiritual Discipline: Lectio Divina***

## **The Experience of Grief:**

### ***Acknowledging the Loss***

Grief and loss are a normal part of our lives. Throughout our life span we experience different forms of loss through situations like; moving, losing an important object, changing schools, death of a pet, breakup of a relationship or marriage, etc. Even though change can be perceived as positive, there are still loss issues associated with change. The intensity of our grief over a loss will vary depending on the meaning of the loss to us. The grief following the death of someone we care about can be one of the most intense and painful experiences we will encounter in our life, especially when a child dies. Grief is the emotional response to losing something important to us. It is not a rigid process that follows the same pattern with every person, it is a unique experience. Grief is a fluid process that changes often depending on the issues and needs of the individual at the time. The grief process is a unique experience for each individual in a family. Family members will all grieve differently based on their unique relationship with the deceased.

The grief chart gives you a visual experience of what responses to grief an individual might have. LoCicero (2004) identifies five experiences of the griever. The five tasks are listed at the top of the chart from left to right. They are: 1) acknowledge the loss 2) experience the pain 3) re-adjust to the loss 4) reinvest emotional energy 5) reconcile the loss.

### **Acknowledge the Loss**

This experience is often characterized by shock, disbelief, and confusion. It is common for the individual to have intellectual awareness of the death but not have the emotional understanding of the reality of the loss. It is the body's way of protecting itself from being overwhelmed with the full impact of the death. A period of shock can last anywhere from hours to days to months. The more traumatic and unexpected the death, the longer the shock may last. It is not unusual for the shock to last from 30 to 60 days and even longer in some situations.

***As you reflect on the initial experience of grief, what aspects can you identify with?***

***Are there other aspects that you have experienced but are not included here?***

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## **Spiritual Discipline: Lectio Divina**

Especially during this time of grief, it is a season for devotional reading of God's Word. It is a time for not reading for mastery or head knowledge of scripture but to experience the tenderness and comfort of God's Word. Lectio Divina is an opening to the inspired Word that reveals new realizations and to experience God's love for us.

We understand what wind is by feeling it blow in our face. We know what snow is like when we make a snowball or watch snowflakes collect on our mittens. This sort of knowing transcends the intellect; it is direct, sensate and experiential. Devotional reading, or lectio divina, invites us into this kind of knowing. It is the kind of knowing for which Paul prayed when he said,

*I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how deep and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know his love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Eph 3:17-19)*

The first 1,500 years of church history were characterized by the practice of lectio divina. Since many people were illiterate and many that could read didn't have Bibles, lectio divina offered a way of attending to Scripture as it was read in church, with an ear to hearing a word from God. Some brief and memorable word or phrase became bread for the soul throughout the week. Devotional reading is not an exercise in mentally critiquing or exegeting the text. It exists to further divine companionship. Lectio divina invites us into God's presence to listen for his particular, loving word to me at this particular moment in time. In lectio divina one listens to the word as it is read aloud, or you read the text aloud for yourself.

## **Foundation and Assurance**

Devotional reading of Scripture is rooted in the assurance that every part of the biblical story - letters, parables, Gospels, Prophets, history - is inspired and can give voice to God's particular word to us.

## Steps for Lectio Divina

- 1. Silence:** quiet preparation of the heart. Come into God's presence, slow down, relax, and intentionally release the chaos and noise in your mind to Him.
- 2. Lectio (Read):** Read the word. Read a Scripture passage slowly and out loud, lingering over the words so that they resonate in your heart. When a word or phrase catches your attention, don't keep reading. Stop and attend to what God is saying to you. Be open to the word. Don't analyze it or judge it. Listen and wait.
- 3. Meditate:** Read the Scripture a second time out loud. Savor the words. Listen for any invitation that God is extending to you in this word. Reflect on the importance of the words that light up to you. Like Mary, who pondered the word in her heart, gently explore the ramifications of God's invitation.
- 4. Respond:** Pray - read the Scripture a third time. Now is the moment to enter into a personal dialogue with God. There is no right or wrong way to do this. The important thing is to respond truthfully and authentically. What feelings has the text aroused in you? Name where you are resistant or want to push back. Become aware of where you feel invited into a deeper way of being with God. Talk to God about these feelings.
- 5. Contemplate:** Rest and wait in the presence of God. Allow some time for the word to sink deeply into your soul. Yield and surrender yourself to God. Before you leave, you might consider a reminder that can help you dwell on or incarnate this word throughout the day.

*- adapted from Adele Ahlberg Calhoun,  
The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook:  
Practices that Transform Us*

## **Week Two: The Experience of Grief**

### **Experiencing the Pain**

***The Invitation:*** Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.  
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be so forever. Amen.

***Petition:*** O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.  
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.  
Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.  
So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands.  
(Ps 63:1-4)

***The Word:*** Job 2:11-13 (New Living Translation)

When three of Job's friends heard of the tragedy he had suffered, they got together and traveled from their homes to comfort and console him. Their names were Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. When they saw Job from a distance, they scarcely recognized him. Wailing loudly, they tore their robes and threw dust into the air over their heads to show their grief. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and nights. No one said a word to Job, for they saw that his suffering was too great for words.

The Word of the Lord.

### *Daily Scripture Readings*

**Sunday: Isa 40:18-31**  
**Monday: Jer 18:1-4,6**  
**Tuesday: Ps 18:28-32**  
**Wednesday: Rom 5:3-5**  
**Thursday: Ps 147:3**  
**Friday: I Cor 13:12**  
**Saturday: Rev 21:4**

**Reflection:** Silent (prayer) and Written (journaling)

**God's Promise:** I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord  
in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and  
take heart and wait for the Lord. (Ps 27:13-14)

### *Spiritual Readings:*

**Is God unfair? Is God silent? Is God hidden? What we think about God, and  
believe about God, matters - really matters - as much as anything in life matters.**  
- Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God*

**We have no way of knowing how much strain our faith can take until we actually  
suffer. Only then do we know whether our faith is grounded where it should be.  
Very few of us pass the test of suffering well. When the chips are down and we do  
not know why we can trust God, we may find very soon that we do not see why we  
should...If all religious issues were boiled down to their essence, there would be two  
inescapable questions: Is God there? And, is God good?**  
- Os Guinness, *God in the Dark*

**God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our  
pain; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.**  
- C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

**Sorrow never entirely leaves the soul of those who have suffered a severe loss. If  
anything, it may keep going deeper. But this depth of sorrow is the sign of a healthy  
soul, not a sick soul...It is not something to escape but something to embrace. Jesus  
said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." (Matthew 5.4)  
Sorrow indicates that people who have suffered loss are living authentically in a  
world of misery...Sorrow is noble and gracious. It enlarges the soul until the soul is  
capable of mourning and rejoicing simultaneously, of feeling the world's pain and  
hoping for the world's healing at the same time. However painful, sorrow is good  
for the soul.**

- Gerald Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*

**I ask no dream, no prophet ecstasies,  
no sudden rending of the veil of clay,  
no angel visitant, no opening skies;  
but take the dimness of my soul away.**

- George Croly's *1854 Hymn*

*"Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart"*

**No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing. At other times, it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting. Yet I want the others to be about me. I dread the moments when the house is empty. If only they would take to one another and not me.**

- C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*



*Song: Be Still My Soul (Katherine von Schlegel, b. 1697)*

*Verse 1*

*Be still, my soul, The Lord is on thy side.  
Bear patiently, The cross of grief or pain.  
Leave to thy God, to order and provide.  
In every change, He faithful will remain.  
Be still, my soul, Thy best thy heavenly Friend.  
Through thorny ways, Leads to a joyful end.*

*Verse 2*

*Be still, my soul, thy God doth undertake.  
To guide the future as He has the past.  
Thy hope, thy confidence, let nothing shake.  
All now mysterious shall be bright at last.  
Be still, my soul, the waves and wind still know.  
His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below.*

*Verse 3*

*Be still, my soul, the hour is hastening on.  
When we shall be forever with the Lord.  
When disappointment, grief and fear are gone.  
Sorrow forgot, Love's purest joys restored.  
Be still, my soul, when change and tears are past.  
All safe and blessed, we shall meet at last.*

*Spiritual Discipline: Examen*

## **The Experience of Grief:**

### ***Experience the Pain***

During this task, the individual is overwhelmed with intense emotions, thoughts, feelings, and physical reactions to their grief. It is a time of disorientation with the individual fearing a loss of control over their mind and body. It can be very disconcerting to find such intense emotion in one's body and not be able to control it. The individual may experience many conflicting feelings that are confusing and unsettling to them. Anger and guilt are two normal feelings that may accompany grief and yet they have the potential to do the most damage if the individual cannot process them and let them go. This part of their grief can last for many months. It is important not to try to escape the pain by staying busy or taking medication to deaden the feelings of grief. Neglecting your feelings will only delay your grief work and intensify the feelings. Working through the pain of one's grief may be one of the most difficult tasks of life.

**As you reflect on your experience of grief, what aspects can you identify with?**

**Are there other aspects that you have experienced but are not included here?**

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## Spiritual Discipline: The Prayer of Examen

### *How To Pray When It Feels Impossible*

One of the many challenges for those who are in grief is having the energy and trust to be able to pray. You may feel like you are having to “re-learn” or “begin in a new way” spiritual practices that were previously important to you.

More than 400 years ago St. Ignatius of Loyola encouraged prayer-filled mindfulness of God by proposing what has been called the Daily Examen. It is a practice of prayerful reflection on the events of the day in order to recognize God's presence and to discern his direction for us.

Try this version of St. Ignatius's prayer.

1. Become aware of the presence of God.
2. Review the day with gratitude.
3. Gratitude is the foundation of our relationship with God. Walk through your day in the presence of God and note its joys and delights.
4. Reflect on the feelings you experienced during the day. Ask what God is saying through these feelings.
5. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.
6. Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to something during the day that *God* thinks is particularly important. It may be a vivid moment or something that seems insignificant.
7. Look toward tomorrow.
8. Ask God to give you His presence for tomorrow's challenges.

St. Ignatius encouraged people to talk to Jesus like a friend. End the Daily Examen with a conversation with Jesus. Ask forgiveness for your sins. Ask for his protection and help. Ask for his wisdom about the questions you have and the heartache you feel. Do all this being mindful that in spite of your grief, you are choosing to have trust and gratitude.

## **Examen: My Emotions**

### **1. Become aware of the presence of God.**

### **2. Review the day with gratitude.**

I spend a few moments in gratitude, thanking God for one or two of the blessings, big and small, that I've received today.

### **3. Pay attention to your emotions.**

I ask God to review my day emotion by emotion. How did I feel when I woke up this morning? As I was showering, eating breakfast dressing for the day? How did I feel when I began the tasks of the day? As the morning progressed? And so on I quickly pass over the fleeting emotions but dwell on the more pervasive ones or those I hadn't notice before. I also speak with God as I notice shifts in my emotions throughout the day.

### **4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.**

I choose the strongest emotion of the day, and I speak to God about the way I responded to that emotion as the day progressed. Were they emotions that moved me closer to God and deeper in faith, hope, and love? Were they ones that made me feel lost or frustrated?

I speak with God about this, thanking God when my response to the emotion was in sync with my Christian calling, and asking for forgiveness and healing when my response was not.

### **5. Look toward tomorrow.**

Knowing that my emotions are only partially in my control, I reflect on what emotions I want to have tomorrow. IF I could choose only one, what would it be: joy? peace? loving-kindness? courage? gratitude? I pick one of these and imagine myself living out tomorrow with this emotion as my companion. I ask God to grant me the *grace* to be open to this emotion tomorrow and to put it to good use if and when it does come.

And I do all this with trust and gratitude.

*- adapted from Adele Ahlberg Calhoun,  
The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook:  
Practices that Transform Us*

### **Week Three: The Experience of Grief Re-Adjusting To The Loss**

***The Invitation:*** I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.  
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be so forever. Amen.

***Petition:*** In you, O Lord, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame! In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me! Be to me a rock of refuge, to which I may continually come; for you are my rock and my fortress. For you, O Lord are my hope, my trust, O Lord. (Ps 71:1-3; 5)

***The Word:*** I Pet 1:3-9

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining (the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

The Word of the Lord.

### *Daily Scripture Readings*

**Sunday:** Lam 3:21-23, 26  
**Monday:** Zeph 3:17; Matt 5:1-4  
**Tuesday:** Isa 26:3; Jas 4:8  
**Wednesday:** 2 Chron 16:9; Isa 41:10  
**Thursday:** Jer 31:3; 33:3  
**Friday:** Isa 45:3  
**Saturday:** Ezek 36:24-26

**Reflection:** Silent (prayer) and Written (journaling)

**God's Promise:** For it is you who light my lamp; the Lord my God lightens my darkness. For by you I can run against a troop, and by my God I can leap over a wall. This God - his way is perfect, the word of the Lord proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him. For who is God, but the Lord? And who is a rock, except our God? -- the God who equipped me with strength and made my way blameless. (Ps 18:28-32)

### *Spiritual Readings:*

**How can we but love Him when we know that He numbers the very hair of our heads, marks our path, and orders our ways?**

- Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*

**O joy that seekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to thee;  
I trace the rainbow through the rain, And feel the promise is not vain  
That morn shall tearless be.**

- George Matheson, "*O Love That Will Not Let Me Go*"

**What comes into our minds when we think of God is the most important thing about us...The most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given moment may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like...That our idea of God corresponds as nearly as possible to the true being of God is of immense importance to us.**

- A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*

**How can you expect God to speak in that gentle and inward voice which melts the soul, when you are making so much noise with your rapid reflections? Be silent and God will speak again.**

- Francois Fenelon, *Spiritual Letters*, No. XXII.

**Come and sit in the darkness with me.  
Come and sit for more than five minutes.  
Feel pain and sorrow that defy definition.  
Don't reach for the light switch.  
Let the darkness not be a fearful place.  
Find God's hand in the dark. Stay here.  
Come and sit with me in the darkness  
and watch the world that you have always  
known keep moving.**

-- Jamison Dickson, *Just Fifteen*

### **Psalm 18 (Adapted)**

**I love you, God. I know you are my inner strength, especially now when my body does not have the strength that I took for granted in the past. God, my deliverer, I turn to you. Sometimes I feel that I do not want to go on. I get swallowed up by the floods of self-pity and discouragement. In my distress I cry out to you. Reach out to me and rescue me from the enemy of pain. Set me free of its grasp of resentment. Fill me with courage. When the darkness of constant pain threatens to overcome me, brighten the darkness with your presence. With you by my side I can go through this. You are like a rock. You will be my strength. You are like a shield. You can protect my spirit from being broken by my body's pain. I will keep coming to you, touching the hem of your garment of love and feeling the spiritual energy which you share with me. I love you and I place my trust in you. Amen.**

- Joyce Rupp, *Praying Our Goodbyes*

**I have found comfort knowing that the sovereign God who is in control of everything, is the same God who has experienced the pain I live with every day. No matter how deep the pit into which I descend, I keep finding God there. He is not aloof from my suffering but draws near to me when I suffer. He is vulnerable to pain, quick to shed tears, and acquainted with grief. God is a suffering Sovereign who feels the sorrow of the world.**

- Gerald Sittser, *A Grace Disguised* (Dawson, p. 85)

*Song: "Holy Spirit" Brian and Katie Torwalt*

*There's nothing worth more; That will ever come close  
Nothing can compare; You're our Living Hope  
Your Presence*

*I've tasted and seen; Of the sweetest of loves  
Where my heart becomes free; And my shame is undone*

*Your presence Lord*

*Holy Spirit You are welcome here; Come flood this place and fill the atmosphere  
Your glory God is what our hearts long for; To be overcome by Your presence Lord*

*Your presence Lord*

*(end)  
Let us become more aware of Your presence  
Let us experience the glory of Your goodness  
(Repeat)*

*Lord  
Holy Spirit You are welcome here; Come flood this place and fill the atmosphere  
Your glory God is what our hearts long for; To be overcome by Your presence Lord*

*Spiritual Discipline: Practicing the Presence*



## **The Experience of Grief:**

### ***Re-adjusting to the Loss***

This is the time of struggling with new roles and responsibilities. The task is to adapt to the new environment. There may still be strong feelings of missing the individual and yearning to have them back. There are many challenges like learning to be a single parent, becoming comfortable with the finances, learning to cook, being single again in a couple-oriented society, rethinking parenting styles, and many others. It is common for the person to resent the roles that have been forced upon them, but they know they must move forward to survive.

***As you reflect on your experience of grief, what aspects can you identify with?***

***Are there other aspects that you have experienced but are not included here?***

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## **Spiritual Discipline: Practicing the Presence**

Among the many struggles that are experienced by those who are grieving is to be able to pray. Head knowledge will say that praying is essential during this season. We can also tell ourselves that we know, and truly believe, that praying is important for us to experience God's love, grace and mercy as we try to make sense and find healing in the grief. But having the heart and energy to pray seems far removed from us.

So how do we pray in grief?

Grief presents the opportunity to experience God in new and deeper ways. The old structures and expectations of prayer are pushed aside and there exists the possibility or praying in a way that brings us deeper into relationship with the One who can heal and restore us. But it takes practice. When we seek to "Practice the Presence" of God, we are intentionally giving a few minutes to be aware of God with us *in that moment*. We begin by simply saying,

**"Lord, I am here. And I know you are too. Help me to be aware of your Presence."**

You will be surprised how those three brief sentences of invitation will open you up to God entering into your heart, mind and soul in the ways that you need in that moment.

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. How aware are you of the possibility of meeting God during the tasks of your day?
2. How easy is it for God to get your attention?
3. When are you best able to hear God's still, small voice?

### **Exercises:**

1. Offer yourself to God for the day ahead. Determine when during the day you will take a moment to seek an awareness of His Presence. Decide what you will do with those brief moments: sit quietly, walk away from your desk, step outside, read a brief scripture or listen to a song that brings you into God's presence on Spotify or iTunes.
2. Practice the presence in interruptions or unexpected turns in your day. Whenever an interruption happens, tell God "I am here."
3. Use some scriptures as prayers that make you attentive to God's Presence. The scripture offered in this week's devotions are a great place to start.

*- adapted from Adele Ahlberg Calhoun,  
The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*

## **Week Four: The Experience of Grief Reinvesting Emotional Energy**

***The Invitation:*** Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations..  
So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.  
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in  
the beginning, is now, and will be so forever. Amen.

***Petition:*** Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and uphold me with a willing spirit. (Ps 51:2)

***The Word:*** Rom 8:31-39

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;  
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Word of the Lord.

### *Daily Scripture Readings*

**Sunday:** 2 Cor 4:7-9; 12:9  
**Monday:** Isa 43:18-19  
**Tuesday:** Ps 22:2-3; 2 Cor 1:34  
**Wednesday:** Ps 139:9-10  
**Thursday:** Jer 29:11; 1 Cor 12:9-10  
**Friday:** Ps 42:8  
**Saturday:** Isa 60:20; Heb 6:18-19

**Reflection:** Silent (prayer) and Written (journaling)

**God's Promise:** He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake. (Ps 23:3)

### *Spiritual Readings:*

**Let Him put you on His wheel and whirl you as He likes, and as sure as God is God and you are you, you will turn out exactly in accordance with the vision. Don't lose heart in the process. If you have ever had the vision of God, you may try as you like to be satisfied on a lower level, but God will never let you.**

- Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*

**Tim Keller likened this to how people used to rub salt into meat to keep it from going bad. Grieving with hope doesn't mean that we become glad about death. Instead, we rub hope deep into our grief. We seek to press hope into our grief so that we might become tender; so that we may not grieve as those without hope.**

- Tim Keller, *Rubbing Hope Into The Reality of Grief*

**Even the saddest things can become, once we have made peace with them, a source of wisdom and strength for the journey that still lies ahead.**

- Frederick Buechner, *quoted in A Grace Disguised*

**It is said of God that no one can behold his face and live. I always thought this meant that no one could see his splendor and live. A friend said perhaps it means that no one could see his sorrow and live. Or perhaps his sorrow is his splendor.**

- Nicholas Wolterstorff, *quoted in A Grace Disguised*

**But when the time comes to enter the darkness in which we are naked and helpless and alone; in which we see the insufficiency of our greatest strength and the hollowness of our strongest virtues; in which we have nothing of our own to rely on; and nothing in our nature to support us, and nothing in the world to guide us or give us light - then we find out whether or not we live by faith.**

- Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*

**We must be consumed either by the anger of the storm god or by the love of the living God. There is no way around life and its sufferings. Our only choice is whether we will be consumed by the fire of our own heedless fears and passions or allow God to refine us in his fire and to shape us into a fitting instrument for his revelation, as he did Moses. We need not fear God as we fear all other suffering, which burns and maims and kills. For God's fire, though it will perfect us, will not destroy.**

- Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews*

**Peace, in the ultimate meaning of the word, is not the absence of conflict. It is not the accumulation of wealth, or comfort and ease, or a state of happiness. Peace is that sense down deep inside that says not matter what happens, all is well with my soul.**

- Verdell Davis, *Let Me Grieve But Not Forever*

**Song: "I Have A Shelter" by Steve and Vicki Cook and Bob Kauflin  
in Come Weary Saints**

*I have a shelter in the storm  
When troubles pour upon me  
Though fears are rising like a flood  
My soul can rest securely  
O Jesus, I will hide in You  
My place of peace and solace  
No trial is deeper than Your love  
That comforts all my sorrows*

*I have a shelter in the storm  
When all my sins accuse me  
Though justice charges me with guilt  
Your grace will not refuse me  
O Jesus, I will hide in You  
Who bore my condemnation  
I find my refuge in Your wounds  
For there I find salvation*

*I have a shelter in the storm  
When constant winds would break me  
For in my weakness, I have learned  
Your strength will not forsake me  
O Jesus, I will hide in You  
The One who bears my burdens  
With faithful hands that cannot fail  
You'll bring me home to heaven*

**Spiritual Discipline: Self Care**

## **The Experience of Grief:**

### ***Reinvest Emotional Energy***

New roles and responsibilities eventually become less painful and more satisfying. Effectively taking on these new roles and responsibilities can assist in giving a sense of positive self-worth as the individual begins to feel capable of taking care of themselves. Having survived such a great crisis, they now see the light at the end of the tunnel. There is a need to reinvest emotional energy into new tasks, relationships, hobbies and other things that begin to help define the new person, which is beginning to emerge.

***As you reflect on your experience of grief, what aspects can you identify with?***

***Are there other aspects that you have experienced but are not included here?***

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## Spiritual Discipline: Self-Care

God inhabits our bodies, delighting in every inch of us. Every eccentricity and peculiarity is received. Every longing and self-destructive habit is known. God knows us through and through and still wants to make His home inside of us. The fact that the Holy Spirit wants to abide in us is one way we know how infinitely precious and beloved we are. We are God's own prized possessions. Prized possessions are something you take care of.

An important aspect of grief that is rarely acknowledged is that grief has a physical expression. The most common experience is a deep sense of tiredness and low-energy. . For some, simply getting a solid night of sleep is an important goal and accomplishment. For others, taking a walk in the neighborhood is done with some effort, but is done. Too often, one of the things that quickly falls away in grief is the attention that is given to self-care. Paying attention to physical needs will go hand in hand with paying attention to spiritual and emotional needs when one is grieving.

Our bodies tell us what is going on with inside our soul. Sleeplessness, emotional distress, anxiety all find a place to express themselves in our bodies in a sort of "grief burnout." The phrase "self-care" lends itself to being perceived as being self-absorbed or even selfish. Time that is given to taking care of our bodies is in fact an act of worship. "You realized, don't you, that you are the temple of God, and God himself is present to you? (1 Corinthians 3:16, *The Message*) Being attentive to our physical needs honors God's creation and shows that I value myself, just as my heavenly Father values me.

Self-care is not solely concerned with our bodies but embraces other areas of our lives that make us who we are: our relationships, our interests, our work and our play. It is during this season of grief that we need to give ourselves permission to do those things that remind us of who we are and who God created us to be.

### TO THINK ABOUT:

1. Have you neglected caring for your health, your body, and other relationships?
2. How might Jesus be inviting you more deeply into some area of self-care?
3. What can you hope for as you pay attention to your need for self-care?



### **SELF-CARE EXERCISES:**

1. Care for yourself by planning a day you would enjoy. Choose where you want to be and who you want to be with. Celebrate the gift of the day and yourself.
2. Where in your body life do you need a new beginning? What practices and patterns that tie into food, rest, work or relationships would you like to change? How can you cooperate with God in an effort to honor your body as his temple?
3. When you come down hard on yourself, remember that you can begin again. Confess your harsh self-treatment and ask God for grace to receive who you are. The Christian message is about new beginnings - every day.
4. Keep a record of how much you sleep. Are you respecting your God-given need for rest and recreation? As a discipline, ask God how long he wants you to sleep. Is it more or less?
5. Cultivate ways of nurturing and caring for your body - in whatever way works for you. Spent time with your hobbies and people who bring you life. Pick up an interest you have ignored.

*- adapted from Adele Ahlberg Calhoun,  
The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook:  
Practices that Transform Us*

## **Week Five: Experience the Grief Reconciling The Loss**

**The Invitation:** For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me! (Job 19:25-27)  
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be so forever. Amen.

**Petition:** Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!  
O Lord, hear my voice!  
Let your ears be attentive  
to the voice of my pleas for mercy!  
(Ps 130:1-2)

**The Word:** Mark 4:36-41; Ps 107:28-31

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith? And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

*Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,  
and he delivered them from their distress.  
He made the storm be still,  
and the waves of the sea were hushed.  
Then they were glad that the waters were quiet,  
and he brought them to their desired haven.  
Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,  
for his wondrous works to the children of man!*

The Word of the Lord.

### *Daily Scripture Readings*

**Sunday:** Ps 27:4-5; Job 42:5  
**Monday:** Ps 55:22; Ps 126:5-6  
**Tuesday:** Eccles 3:11  
**Wednesday:** Ps 16:11  
**Thursday:** 1 Cor 15:52-57  
**Friday:** Ps 30:11-12; Col. 2:7  
**Saturday:** Job 19:25-27

**Reflection:** Silent (prayer) and Written (journaling)

**God's Promise:** He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. (Rev 21:4)

### *Spiritual Readings:*

**Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moment are key moments, and life itself is grace.**

- Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then*

**I am content to know that the God of my past life is also the God of my life to come. And so I am striving to listen to my life today. To feel my pains acutely and my joys deeply. To sigh less and laugh more. To think about my feelings and feel along with my thinking. To pay attention when my body and my spirit tell me to slow down before I lose myself again. To celebrate the little things that constitute my daily life.**

- Verdell Davis, *Let Me Grieve, But Not Forever*

**I have often imagined my own story fitting into some greater scheme, the half of which I may never fathom. I simply do not see the bigger picture, but I choose to believe that there is a bigger picture and that my loss is part of some wonderful story authored by God himself. I choose to believe that God is working toward some ultimate purpose.**

- Gerald Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*

**Hope is symbolized in Christian iconography by an anchor. And what does an anchor do? It keeps the ship on course when wind and waves rage against it. But the anchor of hope is sunk in heaven, not on earth.**

- Gregory Floyd, *A Grief Unveiled*

**No Christian escapes a taste of the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land.**

- Evelyn Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit*

**If we've learned anything from the prophet Ezekiel and the apostle John, it's that heaven is real. It's not a state or condition, but a place. A place with streets, gates, walls and rivers. We are wrong in thinking that heaven is wispy, thin and vaporous. It is earth that is like withering grass, not heaven.**

- Joni Eareckson Tada, *Heaven: Your Real Home*

***Song: In Christ Alone:***

***Stuart Townend & Keith Getty Copyright © 2001***

***In Christ alone my hope is found,  
He is my light, my strength, my song;  
This Cornerstone, this solid Ground,  
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.  
What heights of love, what depths of peace,  
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!  
My Comforter, my All in All,  
Here in the love of Christ I stand.***

***In Christ alone! - who took on flesh,  
Fullness of God in helpless babe.  
This gift of love and righteousness,  
Scorned by the ones He came to save:  
Till on that cross as Jesus died,  
The wrath of God was satisfied -  
For every sin on Him was laid;  
Here in the death of Christ I live.***

***There in the ground His body lay,  
Light of the world by darkness slain:  
Then bursting forth in glorious day  
Up from the grave He rose again!  
And as He stands in victory  
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me,  
For I am His and He is mine -  
Bought with the precious blood of Christ.***

***No guilt in life, no fear in death,  
This is the power of Christ in me;  
From life's first cry to final breath,  
Jesus commands my destiny.  
No power of hell, no scheme of man,  
Can ever pluck me from His hand:  
Till He returns or calls me home,  
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand.***

***Spiritual Discipline: Sabbath***

## **The Experience of Grief:**

### ***Reconcile the Loss***

As one begins to take their life in new directions, there is an opportunity to focus energy on making decisions on the future and the quality of life. They understand that moving on in life is a necessity that in no way questions their love or commitment to the person that has died. They transform their relationship with the deceased from one of physical to one of memory. They are comfortable bringing the deceased back into their lives during those special dates to celebrate the life they shared together, without it hurting their efforts of moving forward. They understand that *grief is not the process of forgetting, but of remembering with less pain.*

***As you reflect on your experience of grief, what aspects can you identify with?***

***What does it mean for you to remember the one you loved with less pain?***

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## **Spiritual Discipline: Sabbath**

**You are not made for the Sabbath; the Sabbath is made for you.**

**- Mark 2:27**

It is easy to think that the practice of Sabbath was designed for those who are overly busy the other six days of the week. In truth, Sabbath is not so much for those who are physically too busy; but for those whose souls are weary. That can indeed happen from the demands of life; but those who are grieving know well the sense of soul weariness.

When we know such soul weariness from grief, the impulse is to find all sorts of ways to rid ourselves of it. Usually those ways are ones that distract us from rest and quiet and being able to create space to receive the nurture and care that God, through His Holy Spirit, desires to give to you. It may feel as though it sounds self-centered to take Sabbath. It is curious that in our western Christian culture, we act as though taking a Sabbath-rest is a helpful suggestion. The writer of Hebrews holds it high reminding us of the promise of Sabbath and the reminder to make every effort to enter the rest that we may receive the fullness of the promise that Sabbath offers.

What are the benefits of keeping Sabbath - especially during a season of grief?

- It allows us to acknowledge our limits and that we can only take on just so much
- It honors the way God created you by showing your intention to live a healthy and rested life.
- It provides the opportunity to keep company with Jesus in a different way: resting and delighting in Him.
- It creates a sense of trust in God for all that you are not doing and taking care of

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. What difficulties or compulsions that have risen in your grief challenge your sabbath rest?
2. How might sabbath nourish and replenish you during this unique season?
3. How might not taking a sabbath rest impact your experience of grief?

## Sabbath Practices

Find a candle that holds some beauty or meaning for you. When you have set aside some time - before a meal, or during prayer, meditation, or simply quiet reading - set the candle before you, say a simple prayer or blessing for yourself or someone you love, and light the candle. Take a few mindful breaths. For just this moment, let the hurry of the world fall away.

When we are grieving, or empty or feeling afraid, we tend to isolate, to bear down and just try to get through it, to make it on our own. Jesus says, "When two or more are gathered, there I am in your midst. When we enter into companionship with another, something larger than ourselves is born. Choose a few people whose companionship you desire when times are difficult. Resolve to see them out whenever you feel as though you are losing your way. One of the most precious gifts we can offer is to be a place or refuge, to be Sabbath for one another.

Before Sabbath time, choose a quiet place. Come to rest. Allow the heart and mind to speak of things that need to be spoken aloud. Say those things for which you feel burdened, those things for which you need to be forgiven, ways in which you were short with others who you felt did not understand what you are experiencing. Notice how much you have been grasping during the week to make these things go away. Notice how they dissolve so much more easily when they are simply spoken aloud.

Prepare a "sabbath box or basket". Choose a basket or cover a grocery-size box with gift paper. Each Saturday evening, gather as a family to put all the things you don't need to take with you into Sunday. Drop cell phones and work projects into the box.

Awake gently to your sabbath day. If it is possible, don't set an alarm. Let your body wake naturally. As you come to consciousness, take several deep breaths and open your body wide to God for the new day. Thank God that you are fearfully and wonderfully made. Thank him for the gift of the day before you. Is God speaking to you in any way? Listen and respond. Get up slowly and attend to your desire to encounter and rest in God today.

*- adapted from Adele Ahlberg Calhoun,  
The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook:  
Practices that Transform Us*

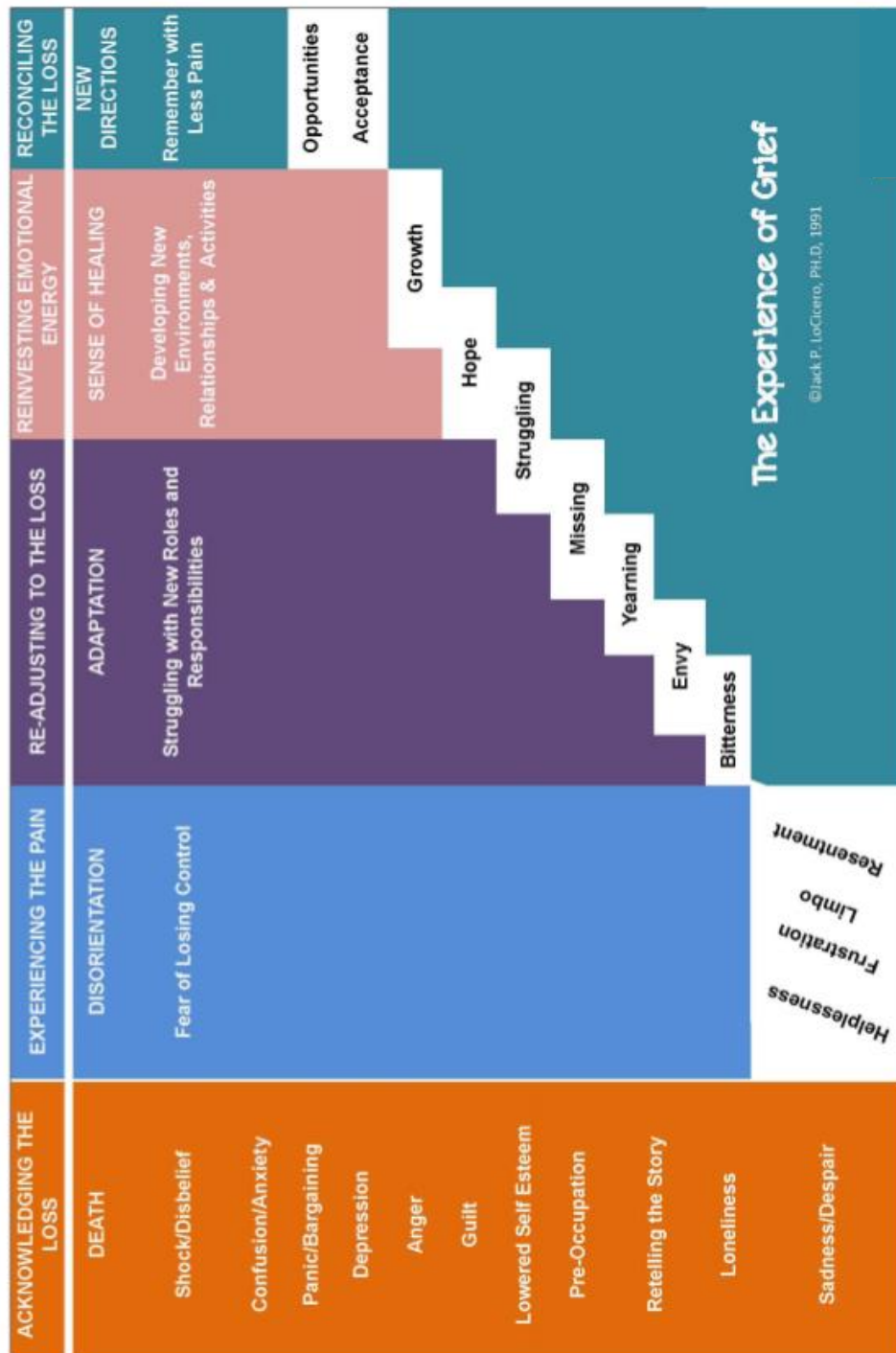


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## APPENDIX F

### THE EXPERIENCE OF GRIEF CHART



Source: The Experience of Grief Chart was developed by hospice and bereavement counselor and educator Dr. Jack LoCicero in 1991. It is a visual tool for educators, counselors, and others working with those who have experienced a death or other significant loss. Researcher was introduced to the chart in 1999 in class taught by Dr. LoCicero, “Dimensions of Grief” in the Master’s of Hospice and Palliative Care, Madonna University, Livonia, Michigan.

**APPENDIX G**  
**PARTICIPANTS AND RESPONSE SHEETS**

#	Cause of death	Person	Time since death	Church Member
P1	Suicide	Friend	Two months	Two years
P2	Suicide	Brother	Three months	Two years
P3	Sudden	Sister	Seven years	Sixteen years
P4	Cancer	Brother	Six months	Six years
P5	Sudden Illness	Husband	Six years	Eighteen years
P6	Sudden Illness	Mother	Two years	Eleven years
P7	Accident	Adult Son	Eight months	Eighteen years
P8	Cancer	Father	Two years	Five years
P9	Suicide	Brother	Six years	Five years
P10	Cancer	Brother	Forty-four yrs	Five years

Participants assigned numbers correspond to the recorded responses on the five separate weekly response sheets.



**Response Sheet Week 1:  
Acknowledging the Loss**

**Please respond to these questions as much or as little as you would like:**

**How would you describe your overall experience of the group?**

P2: I felt so comforted by the intimate sharing of the group. I also felt very safe!

P5: Discussing grief is an incredible way to connect with people if they are willing to go to those deep and hurting parts of their souls.

P6: I like the fact that the members of the group were so open about the loss they had experienced, even though we don't really know each other well.

P8: My overall experience was positive though initially I did experience some resistance to participating and reluctance to delve back into grief.

P9: Positive, but hard to face the difficult emotions.

**How did you experience God?**

P7: I had to call upon God in silent prayer for courage and strength to listen to the others share their grief and experience my own.

P3: Through love and hugs from other group members.

P5: I experienced the presence of God when I heard everyone's stories of loss... such a comfort.

P9: "It is sorrow that opens up within us the capacities of the heavenly life, and it is sorrow that makes us willing to launch our capacities on a boundless sea of service for God and for our fellows. God never uses anybody to a large degree, until after he breaks that one all to pieces."

**How did you notice God's presence with you?**

- P1: I slept well for the first time in weeks. My soul finally began to feel at peace.
- P2: I felt safe and comforted in the presence of God's loved people.
- P3: He gave me the peace of mind and the openness of heart to participate and gain from the experience.
- P8: I definitely feel God's presence in the room while we were all sharing. It was hard to bring up some of the emotions surrounding the death, but in the days following, I did feel God's comfort.
- P9: God kept Justin and I here for Stanwich. I remember sitting in a Soma Series with Chuck where people were talking about times they know God had them in an exact place and time for a reason and it was apparent at that time mine was that exact comment and His aid to Justin as we left "We're here for this church." That didn't fully become apparent until Brian died, and God started to peel me like an onion.

**Why did you enjoy or not enjoy the material this week?**

- P1: I enjoyed the scriptures. They were brief, so it was easier for me to use the new technique of *lector divina*.
- P2: The scriptures were appropriate for me as they hit both high and lows emotionally.
- P4: Loved the grief chart!
- P5: I most enjoyed the application of the spiritual discipline *lectio divina*.
- P6: I enjoyed "practicing" the discipline of *lectio divina*.
- P8: I loved the scriptures and readings you chose. The ones that resonated with me the most were Psalm 13 and Sittser's quote.

**What was the best thing about using the material?**

- P3: Confirmation always that God cares deeply about the brokenhearted... Reading the scripture especially hit home to me. I used *lectio divina* for Psalm 13. The word "but" first shouted out to me. Grief is painful (but) my heart rejoices in His salvation.
- P4: Taking time to be still and think about the material.

P7: I liked having the structure to walk through.

P9: The new technique was a very different way to approach scripture for me. I really enjoyed trying it.

**Did you have any difficulties?**

P1: Reading aloud! I felt self-conscious and honestly (at times) skipped that aspect.

P5: Meditation. I'm always doing something, to sit and be still is hard.

P6: Yes...concentrating and being still.



**Response Sheet Week 2:  
Experiencing The Pain**

**Please respond to these questions as much or as little as you would like:**

**How would you describe your overall experience of the group?**

- P2: Since I wasn't here last week, I didn't experience the group, but I missed it.
- P5: Last week's meeting was intense. People are open and courageous about sharing their grief.
- P7: The group is very comforting. All are slow to speak and quick to listen. Such a place of peace and comfort.
- P8: Difficult. Tonight was hard, emotionally taxing, but ultimately comforting.
- P10: Jesus was a man of sorrows...we are meant to be like Jesus and thus we are meant to bear sorrows.

**How did you experience God?**

- P1: Reading all the materials and learning new scripture verses continued to show me God's character of my loving Father (Abba) cares deeply about my broken heart!
- P2: The comfort from listening to others who feel or have felt similar. Also, listening to how others experienced God in their most difficult moments helped me see where God was/is in these moments.
- P3: I feel that God is working at a deep level to heal what was broken when my sister died.
- P6: I loved the scripture passages this week - especially Psalm 18 - He turns my darkness into light.
- P9: On the doors entering the sanctuary at my home church and on my brother's gravestone says..."Come to me those of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens and I will give you rest which is the same verse that started this section.

### **How did you notice God's presence with you?**

- P2: The emotions followed me through the week, especially after the devastating losses in France. I was very emotional through Saturday when I finally had a few quiet moments to sit and pray and spend time with God.
- P4: Through His Word. I have been marred by death but He is reforming me. I am in the potter's hands.
- P5: I was up in the Berkshires for a few days and I always feel God's presence when I'm sitting on the deck and looking at the lake.
- P7: Peace is present when I seek Him, worship Him and honor the one true God. One Restorer of all things.
- P9: I found God explaining the process of grief and why it's necessary, but the 'why' question does keep popping up...maybe not "why it's necessary", but rather what we gain from going through such experiences.

### **Why did you enjoy or not enjoy the material this week?**

- P1: I enjoyed the prayer-style introduced.
- P2: I especially liked the form of the invitation, the petition, the word.
- P3: Enjoyed Psalm 18:28: My God turns my darkness into light. Romans 5: Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance character; and character, hope.
- P4: The spiritual reading excerpts especially "A Grace Disguised" really resonated with me.
- P5: I like the verses but many were hard as they were used in the service and they forced me back to that place.
- P6: I enjoyed every word on every piece of paper!
- P8: I really like the spiritual discipline Examen but have never used it before. I'm looking forward to making it part of my evening routine.



**What was the best thing about using the material?**

P2: Confirmed the heart of God for his children...especially the weak.

P6: Being drawn closer to God.

P7: Jeremiah 18.1-6: God continues to mold us through all our hardships. There is a lesson to be learned through our grief. Isaiah 23-24 Brings up the 'why'. If God is so powerful and can intervene at anytime, why does he let us harm each other, or let illness occur, particularly to children? Otherwise would we be unthankful, spoiled, etc.? Will we continue to grow through trials in "heaven"? Revelation on 21:4.

P8: Examen - I also love the quotes!

P9: Using the Examen exercise allows for growth and purpose in how I respond to emotions. I especially was drawn to the challenge of choosing an emotion to imagine myself living out tomorrow with God as a companion and I focused on putting this into practice.

**Did you have any difficulties?**

P1: No - although I find that I'm not very good about spending time each day with the scripture.

P3: Time is always short and too often and easily filled with other things!

P4: Apathy/resistance.

P10: No!



**Response Sheet Week 3:  
Re-Adjusting to the Loss**

**Please respond to these questions as much or as little as you would like:**

**How would you describe your overall experience of the group?**

- P1: The group is open, honest sympathetic.
- P2: I loved the willingness of those in the group to open up about the pain they've experienced. I felt especially sad when \_\_\_\_ spoke about her mom's struggle with friends. I am so blessed not to have experienced that.
- P3: good group discussions of heaving other's comments are helpful
- P4: I enjoy the groups willingness to engage and share their hearts.
- P5: Very positive. Some experience grief similar to me and others. I can see my loved one in how they experience grief.
- P6: Each drew us closer. I feel privileged to be trusted with something as intimate as people's personal experience in grief.
- P7: good - group discussions and hearing other's comments are helpful.
- P8: I enjoy the group's willingness to engage and share their hearts.
- P9: I am grateful for these people who are joining me in my grief.
- P10: Everyone's grief walk is different, but an incredible way to connect with someone.

**How did you experience God?**

- P2: Through the hope that I see in people's eyes as they walk in faith through their grief.
- P3: He provided me the time, when I thought I had none to complete this week's work.

P5: In our session last week I liked the comments about how God can use the conflict his children are experiencing to bring healing. That reminded me of how God has walked with me over these past years to bring good from the tragedy of my husband's death.

P7: Calmness during the week.

P9: Something I've had hanging on my fridge is a sticky note saying "The only way to eventually heal is to mourn." Matthew 4: "Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. In grieving, I tried to experience every emotion as it come on. I didn't try to suppress it or run from it.

### **How did you notice God's presence with you?**

P2: More peace in situations that were escalated. I focused on patience, love verses what was being said.

P4: Amazing Peace

P5: I feel more good memories coming, and less sadness/loneliness. It doesn't swamp me like it did.

P6: His presence gave me strength and courage to share.

P9: James 4:8: Come near to God and he will come near to you. God is a gentleman, he will only enter in to where he is invited. I asked him to string light on every nook and cranny to give me the courage to face what would be revealed.

### **Why did you enjoy or not enjoy the material this week?**

P1: I especially liked verses: 2 Chronicles 16.9; Isaiah 41.10; Lamentations 3.21-23, 26

P2: I really focused on the scripture passages this week and found each one very relevant and powerful.

P3: It zeroes in on how I've been feeling about prayer (or lack thereof).

P4: I enjoy the spiritual readings and the spiritual disciplines.

P5: I am really enjoying all the new scripture given us; God is so faithful to us in our time of need.

P6: Loved the song - so perfect. The verses didn't really hit me this week.

- P7: It zeroed in on how I've been feeling about prayer (or lack thereof).
- P8: I am really enjoying all the new scripture verses. God is so faithful to us in our time of need...
- P9: 2 Chronicles 16:9 - Need more context as to what was foolish and why at war.

**What was the best thing about using the material?**

- P1: Stopping; focusing on God, His love this week.
- P2: I realized when I was reading "Practicing the Presence" that I pray often through my day and feel His presence.
- P3: spiritual readings
- P4: Learning so much about the nature of our God...
- P5: Made me want to spend the time.
- P6: Walking through the questions and exercises and reflecting on how they apply to my life..
- P7: Learning so much about the nature of our God.
- P8: Jeremiah 33:3 - Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know." Ezekiel 36:26: I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. As a result of the grief and soul work. I'm healthier than I have ever been mentally and spiritually, which I consider a gift from my brother.
- P9: Jamison Dickson: Watch the world you have always known keep moving- In adjusting to the loss, life seemed incredibly cruel as people went about their day to day life while my life was turned upside down. For a period of time, life was lived one second to another, then 1 minute to the next, eventually an hour and then a day. I wasn't able to think past right now. I wanted the world to halt to let me grieve a minute/hour/day/week.
- P10: Re-connecting me with what I know to be true.

**Did you have any difficulties?**

P6: Yes...staying quiet and trying to feel a sense of the presence of God.

P7: Finding time! Also, the verses were a little more obscure this week and didn't really strike a chord with me.



**Response Sheet Week 4:  
Reinvesting Emotional Energy**

**Please respond to these questions as much or as little as you would like:**

**How would you describe your overall experience of the group?**

- P2: Wonderful as always. I found myself praying for TB afterward since he was so quiet. Just asking God meet him where he is. I like the way you gently probe a comment to help the person go a bit deeper.
- P3: The experience was a positive one, though I didn't initially expect it to be.
- P5: I enjoy and am comforted by everyone's openness.
- P7: Good. helpful to hear comments of others. also nice to be with people I know or have an affection with.

**How did you experience God?**

- P7: Peacefully...given all the loss of our experience.
- P10: Through each person's reflection on the readings from last week.

**How did you notice God's presence with you?**

- P1: Continued to receive affirmation of God's love and care for me through the words of scripture and the readings.
- P7: Calm and peaceful...as always.
- P5: Sharing the story of my step-daughters' being with me at Christmas was a nudge from God to share. Whenever, I think about that time I'm reminded how God has been with me through the grief of Tom's passing.

**Why did you enjoy or not enjoy the material this week?**

P2: Each week I have enjoyed going through the scripture and spiritual reading. This week I decided to read the song as a prayer.

P3: Loved the scriptures.

P9: I loved the Tim Keller quote about rubbing hope into grief. Rubbing salt into a wound is painful but rubbing hope and the wound of grief makes the pain bearable.

**What was the best thing about using the material?**

P4: I am starting to understand how much God wants to comfort us in our sorrow.

P5: Grief can be so all consuming. I think the material has helped to focus inward and reflect on God's presence during grief, how we can care for ourselves and do the work we need to move from grief to hope.

P8: This week I did spend time each day with the scriptures. Isaiah 60:20 was a great scripture to end the week. The days of sorrow will end. My prayer is for J., K., and K., whose grief is still new. Liked some of the spiritual readings. Also liked some of the comments in "self-care".

**Did you have any difficulties?**

**No written responses.**



## **Response Sheet Week 5:**

### **Reconciling the Loss**

**Please respond to these questions as much or as little as you would like:**

#### **How would you describe your overall experience of the group?**

P2: open, warm, relaxed, reflective

P3: amazing, comforting, healing, loving and safe

P8: this group came alongside each other and loved one another through some of their harshest times. They were there to listen and not judge.

P10: Grief is individual - there isn't a wrong way to grieve.

#### **How did you experience God?**

P4: verses are always the closest to God.

P7: His love for our brokenness is powerful.

P9: Through the 'opportunity' of being part of this group.

#### **How did you notice God's presence with you?**

P3: stillness.

P7: peace and...a little joy (few moments).

#### **Why did you enjoy or not enjoy the material this week?**

P5: Love the song "In Christ Alone"

P6: Sharing memories, helped bring all the loved ones lost to life for those of us who had never met them. Very cool way to help someone mourn is to be present and to listen to their stories.



P7: I enjoyed the quotes - little thoughts that make you think; give encouragement.

P9: Sabbath practices!! Good suggestions

P10: The spiritual readings

**What was the best thing about using the material?**

P1: Allowing yourself the freedom to feel any which way

P6: It gives me so much hope and faith. It made me really understand one journey through the grief process...God is in control of all things!

P9: Grief is not the process of forgetting, but of remembering with less pain.

**Did you have any difficulties?**

P2: I did not - transitions were good - however if you miss the talk that week - I do feel you miss the more in depth look @ the material.

P4: No

P5: Being intentional about keeping the sabbath and creating space in a busy schedule.

P7: We fill our lives with so many things that really don't matter.

P9: Relationships are all we have when everything is said and done.

**APPENDIX H**  
**SERMON SERIES**

**Walking With God in Suffering and Grief**

**Sermon Series Preached at Stanwich Church, Greenwich, CT  
January 25 - February, 15, 2015**

1. To Live is Christ  
Phil 1:18-30b
2. Faith in the Midst of Suffering  
Job 1:1-2.13
3. The Soul Work of Grief  
Job 3:1-3; 3:25-26
4. The Lord Appears  
Job 38:1-7; Job 42:1-5  
Rev 21:1-5

**Sermon #3: The Soul Work of Grief  
Job 3:1-3, 25-26**

I was attending a Christmas party and enjoying the evening. I was standing at the end of the buffet table and Carl Higbie came over to me and said with a curious smile on his face - "Jacky, I've been meaning to ask you something. When you first came to Stanwich, I read your resume and I saw that you had worked as a hospice chaplain and as the director of the grief program for a number of years." "Yes, Carl, I did." And then Carl followed with "well, I just want to know how you could do that? Wasn't that just incredibly hard." And then I began to relay to Carl about the work I had done, the staff of 10 art therapists, counselors and social workers I was privileged to lead whose focus was on caring for individuals and families as they grieved. I told him about how the director

of the hospice knew the value in addressing the needs of grieving people and encouraged me in my ideas of how to do that well including creating a grief camp for families, Camp BraveHeart, that still takes place every summer even 10 years later (don't you want to sign up for that?) where entire families come to think about and express their grief. Trust me, much fun is always had. And I know I eagerly talked about how I saw God caring for those who were grieving. Certainly not a typical conversation to take place at a Christmas party but certainly an engaging one.

A few weeks later at an elders' meeting, Carl was giving an introduction to a devotional that he had prepared to begin the meeting. Imagine my surprise when he started it by saying "a few weeks ago, I was talking to Jacky at a party and I have to say that I have never met anyone who was so excited about grief!" Now I know what Carl was saying in that moment but today as we look more closely at the story of Job and the experience of grief I want to assure you that I am NOT excited about grief. I do not seek it. I do not long for it. I do not eagerly embrace it. But what I am excited about and what I hope you will take with you as you leave today is this: Our God DOES seek us as we grieve; longs to be part of that experience and does not abandon us at the darkest moments of our lives, but rather our God embraces us and cares for us in those moments and seasons in ways that shape who we are.

As we look more closely at the grief of Job this week and next our framework of understanding is going to expand and go deeper so that whether you are experiencing grief now or will be in the future you will enter into the experience of grief knowing that you are not alone; God is in it with you and where God is there is always hope.

Let's look more closely at the text. Last week we were introduced to Job and his truly unimaginable experience of the death of his children and loss of his material possessions. That is surely more than enough and then Job suffers an assault on his health. When his three friends come to simply be with him, we are told that the experience of grief and deep suffering had changed his appearance so that even his close friends could not recognize him.

After seven days of silence, seven days of restraint and of not sinning by anything he said, we may wonder why Job now suddenly breaks loose and curses the day of his birth. What is really going on here? One of the impressions we have of Job's words is that here is a man who has not gone haywire at all, but who knows exactly what he is saying and he means every word of it. It is as if Job is at a point where he has just become sick and tired of trying to put a good face on things, when the things he is facing do not have anything good about them at all. Job is calling it like it is. He is honest in his words;. Job does not deny or dilute the pain that he feels but rather expresses it honestly and we could say even forcefully. Job's words tells us that he feels as though the whole created order of the world particularly his world has come apart. Have you experienced that? Do you remember or even know now that deep feeling? I know I have. Within a 27 month period I experienced the death of my best friend, Gretchen, and both my parents. None of the deaths were sudden. Rather, they were all painful to watch, painful to anticipate and painful to bear.

So let's be honest. The third chapter of Job may well be the bleakest chapter in all of Scripture. But it is also a gift to us in that it is a reminder that God allows Job to be that honest, to release his anger, to release his despair. The hard truth is that followers of

God do not always rise from their knees full of encouragement and fresh hope. And when we don't have that sense of encouragement, when hope feels distant and far removed what God wants from us is that we don't deny it or hide from Him. At this moment, Job is living in what could be described as the middle place of grief - the place where those who suffer loss live suspended between a past for which they long for and a future for which they can only hope but find hard to imagine. And this is the place where the soul work of grief is done.

In a real way, Job's words show us clearly the relationship he has with God. Just as parents understand when their children are speaking out of frustration and hurt, and they want their children to turn to them in difficult times, so God desires that you and I be open and honest in our dealings with him. What God always wants is our heart and He especially wants the darkest parts of it. God listens to us even when our tone is shrill and when we cry out with a heart that is in pain. Our pain and frustration may tempt us to avoid God or to be angry at him, but what He wants is for us to rush into his arms, where we can receive the comfort that only He can give.

And as we look at the end of the chapter Job's words just keep spiraling downward and end with *I have no rest, but only turmoil*. Job shows that he is facing more than just tragic circumstances. At its heart, this is a spiritual struggle for him, as he tries to reconcile what has happened with what he believes about God and his ways. And could it be for Job that his struggle is in moving from head knowledge of God to heart trust in Him?

The truth for each of us is that one of the main ways we move from abstract, head knowledge about God to a personal encounter with him is through grief and suffering.

As C. S. Lewis put it, “God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain.” We may have right thinking in our mind about God, but those truths seldom make the journey down into the heart except through disappointment, failure and loss. You really don’t ever come to know that Jesus is all you need, until Jesus is all you have. And grief and suffering have a way of making that very clear.

But how do we actually walk with God in such times? How do we orient ourselves toward him so that suffering changes us for the better rather than for the worse?

For us now, it is in the life and death of Jesus Christ, that we see that God actually experiences pain and suffering just as we do. He truly is God with us, Immanuel, in love and understanding and in our anguish. Just as the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray - they could have just as easily asked Him to teach them how to grieve. And in many ways he did just that. Jesus plunges himself into our suffering so that, when we find ourselves facing suffering and grief, we can turn to him and know that He understands - He gets it.

Recovering from grief and suffering is not like recovering from a disease. Many people don’t come out healed, but many do come out different. No one ever moves out of the shadows of grief apart from some form of hope. What Job will discover in his encounter with God is that goodness and mercy can be counted on to follow him all the days of his life, just as the Psalmist said. God who has given us the good gifts of the past can be depended on to continue to give meaning to our lives in the midst of our grief. Our challenge is to become attentive enough and trusting enough to let this happen.

As hard as it may be to grasp, God not only understands our suffering, He experiences it along with us, much like our own hearts break when we see our children or

others that we love in pain. Pain and death were not part of God's original design and He takes no pleasure in either, but He has promised to redeem our loss and to cause good to come. He asks us to trust His heart, even when we don't understand His ways.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, "declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts (Isa 55. 8-9).

In our anger and pain, just like Job, we can turn toward Him and vent our feelings, even our harsh ones, trusting that He will continue to love us and engage with us. We may choose to turn away from Him, but He will never abandon us. He is always waiting with open arms for us to return to Him and healing comes sooner when we look to Him for comfort. God invites us to ask our questions and wrestle with our doubts. The more we interact with God in our struggle, the more we sense His presence and experience His comfort. He will meet us at our point of need and He is always sufficient. So, ask away! Rather than causing us to lose our faith, asking our questions will ultimately lead us to God, the answer to our deepest needs. Listen to these words from the prophet Isaiah.

I am He who will sustain you, I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you. Isa 46:4

And from the prophet Jeremiah:

Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. Lam 3:22

Let me step briefly into a teacher role and answer a question that I am frequently asked: What can I do to help my friend in grief?

I frequently ask those who are in the middle of their grief is what has been the most unhelpful thing anyone has said to you - to be honest, I usually will ask what is the most ridiculous thing anyone has said to you. Believe me, a question like that gets a quick rise out of anyone who is grieving. So with the intention of guiding us as the body of Christ at Stanwich Church so that we can care for each other well when one of us is grieving let me give you a few ideas about what NOT to say. Trust me, when I say some of these you are going to feel badly because you certainly have said them. I know I have said every single one of these. Here goes:

1. He/she is in a better place. Well, yes, but they aren't with me right here. And along with that heaven must have needed another angel. Well, that's not true. We don't become angels when we die.
2. I'm here for you. Let me know if I can do anything for you. People in grief usually do not know what they need. Offer something concrete. Make specific suggestions. I will come by on Thursday afternoon at 2 pm and either just sit with you or take you out for coffee.
3. How old was your mother/father? It does not matter how old they were. It's the relationship that they are grieving.
4. "I know just how you feel." Because you don't. You may empathize with aspects of grief but it's their grief not yours.

And if you want to know how to care and support each other in grief, you can begin by:

5. Provide concrete assistance - take the initiative
6. Actively listen and be willing to hear stories over and over and over.
7. Give the gift of your physical presence - give the gift of time.



8. Mention the name of the person who has died. One of the greatest fears held by those who are grieving is that the person will be forgotten. We hesitate to say the name of the individual because we do not want to cause pain. We miss something important when we neglect something as seemingly simple as saying their name.
9. Keep in communication, too, in person, by phone, or through a card or note. I send cards six weeks after the death when support and care appears to be dwindling. After the initial attention, many forget the grieving, even though their pain is not gone. Being available six weeks and then months from now is just as important as the time immediately after the death.

It is difficult to leave us in the middle place of grief anticipating what will come next week when we stand with Job in his encounter with God. So I leave you with the story of Jesus. It's a story filled with great hope when Jesus meets the sisters Martha and Mary in their grief. You will find it in John 11 and it's the story of the death of Lazarus and there are some important details that we usually pass over.

Martha and Mary had hoped that Jesus would arrive in time to heal their brother. But Jesus didn't and Lazarus dies. Martha sees Jesus coming and she rushes to meet Him. She is grieving deeply and yet she has this incredible exchange with Jesus: He declares the words to her that have provided and will continue to provide comfort and encouragement to many in the face of death and loss. I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. And then he asks Martha: "Do you believe this?" She declares that she believes that He is the Christ the one who comes into the world.

Mary, the one who last we saw was sitting at the feet of Jesus learning from Him and being encouraged that she had chosen the better thing is now literally locked up in her grief surrounded by the professional mourners. In some ways it would be easy to judge Mary. She should know better. She should have hope. She should not be so sad. But her brother has died and her grief is overwhelming to her.

But then grieving Martha goes to her grieving sister and says these incredible words. Words of invitation that are spoken to each of us in our time of grief. The Teacher is here and He's looking for you. And we are told that Mary takes off running to be with the One that she trusts and loves.

I am drawn to this story for a simple reason: Mary, with everything she knew about God, is grieving. Just like Job. Just like I have done and no doubt will do again. Knowing that gives me and gives you permission to grieve. But here is what is truly important. Mary knows where hope is found. It is found in running to Jesus the One who will meet her and welcome her in her grief.

Lasting comfort, lasting peace, true hope is not found in what you know, but Who you know. Real comfort comes when you rest in your relationship as the child of the most wise, most powerful, most loving, most gracious, most forgiving, and most faithful Person in the universe. Our God has promised to never leave us (Josh 1:5; Heb 13:5). He is committed to making even the worst moments in your life result in good (Rom 8:28-38).

So now I remind you of these promises to you from God all from His Word:

He is always with you. Isa 43:2

God will change your heartbreak into joy (eventually). Isa 61:3

God will give you the strength you need exactly when you need it. Isa 40:29

And though you may feel that your grief and heaviness will never end,  
God promises to bestow on us 'a crown of beauty instead of ashes,  
the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise  
instead of despair. Isa 61:3

Thanks be to God!

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